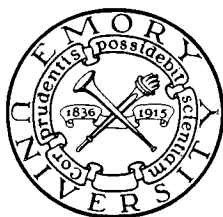


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M A D.

M A D.

A STORY OF DUST AND ASHES.

BY

GEORGE MANVILLE FENN,

AUTHOR OF "BENT, NOT BROKEN," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

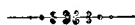
TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18 CATHERINE ST. STRAND.

1863.

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M A D.



CHAPTER I.

HOME.

SOFTLY along the dark passages of the County Arms stole Septimus Hardon, and with stealthy hand he loosened bar and bolt, till the front-door yielded to his touch, and he stood in the gray dawn of the morning, looking round the market-place for a few minutes before making his way along a road not travelled by him for years.

How familiar every spot seemed as he left the town behind!—spots dimly seen as yet, but familiar enough to cause a swelling sensation at his heart, and tears to rise unbidden to his eyes. Now he stopped to gaze upon some old half-forgotten scene; now to listen to the morning hymn

rising from the wood upon his left—loud and high notes from thrush and finch, mingled with the starling's mocking whistle, the mellow flute-tones of the blackbird, and the incessant caw of the rooks. All around seemed so peaceful, so utter a change from the miseries of a close London court, that his thoughts went back from the present to the old days of his boyhood, and for a while a sense of elation coursed through his veins, his eyes sparkled, and he gazed round with delight till they rested upon the spire of the old church, when a chill fell upon his spirit once more, as he remembered the funeral and the miseries of the present. Then, for the hundredth time, he recalled his father's lonely and fearful end—passing away without a word of forgiveness; his own return as a beggar to his old home, without a right therein—to be met as it were upon the threshold, and to be told that he was an intruder who could be admitted only upon sufferance. But he would enter, he said, if only to ask of the dead to give him a sign respecting the truth of his uncle's words.

Septimus Hardon's brow furrowed, and he

walked on hastily ; then he fell back into his listless, weary way. It was very early, or his gesticulations would have excited attention ; but he met no one, and once more hurrying on, he at last stood before the clump of trees within whose shades was the gloomy moss-grown house where so large a portion of his life had been spent. He passed through the rusty iron gate, which creaked mournfully, and then stood before the old place, which looked more gloomy, moss-grown, and damp than ever. Desolation everywhere ; for when the son left his home, the father had shut himself up, discharging the gardener and all the indoor servants but the one who filled the post of housekeeper. The vine still hung to the large trellis-work, but here and there, tangled with ivy, it had fallen away, and lay across the path ; the windows were dim, the paths overgrown with weeds ; while between the door-steps the withered herbage that had grown up the previous year, rustled in the breeze of the early spring. Over such windows as yet possessed them, yellow time-stained blinds were drawn, while here and there upon the ground-

floor, the shutters were closed, or half-closed over some broken pane. Old sparrows' nests were in the spouts and beneath the eaves, where long strands of hay, mingled with half-rotten feathers, blew about. One long piece of guttering had fallen from its support, and hung so that, in rainy seasons, the wet streamed down upon one of the window-sills, whose woodwork was green and rotted away, and everywhere the walls were mossy and damp-stained.

The place might have had upon it the legal seal, and been in Chancery, for there was not a sign amidst the dreary desolation to indicate that it had been inhabited for years; and as Septimus stood there associating the gloomy place with the borders of the shades he had so lately quitted, it was with a cold hand seeming to clutch his heart. Bitter, staring desolation everywhere, and all in keeping with the wretchedness within his breast; for he knew that behind those walls, perhaps behind the very window that faced him, there was one lying cold and still, staring blankly upwards, in spite of hand-closed eyelids, straight

up towards heaven and futurity. And he had died alone in this desolate house, without even a servant by him. Septimus Hardon shuddered as he recalled all that had followed, while, pushing his way through the wet shrubs, he went round to the other side of the house.

Desolation everywhere ; as there was death in the house, so there seemed to be the traces of the cold shade all around. The once smooth lawn ragged and tangled with the dead grass and weeds of other years ; the gravel-walks almost obliterated ; the rustic flower-vases covered with green moss, broken down and rotting away ; the long flower-stand that he recollected as his mother's pride, lying in broken, sodden fragments beneath the drawing-room window ; and the little greenhouse a wreck of broken glass and stained woodwork. While here again were broken windows, half-closed shutters, and drawn-down, torn, and yellow blinds. Everywhere neglect and ruin, so sad, so mournful, that Septimus sat down upon one of the broken vases, covered his face with his hands, and groaned for the irrevocable past.

But now once again came the thought of the dead, and slowly rising from his seat, the stranger stood wondering in which room his father lay. A moment's thought told him that he would have been removed from the bedroom where the horrible discovery was made; and Septimus looked along the house till his eye rested upon one blind-drawn window, whose sash was lowered a few inches from the top, where the yellow blind, torn a little at one corner from the roller, fluttered softly in the morning breeze.

The heart of Septimus Hardon told him that it must be here—here in his own old bedroom that his father had been laid—in the room where, as a boy, he the son had slept—where the mother long passed away, and the father now dead, had so regularly, night by night, come to stand at his bedside for a minute or two before seeking their own.

Lying there, and no one stirring about the place to admit him! It was doubtful even whether a living soul was in the house, for all was closed, and he had not seen a trace of life. He must see

the dead, if only for a moment, and he could reach the window-sill from the low ivy-covered wall, thrust up the sash, hold back the blind, and then climb in, and—and—and what?

Septimus Hardon in spirit asked himself again and again that question; and at last, in slow, measured tones, he whispered:

“Stand face to face with the dead!”

He shuddered, as once more that cold, stern face seemed to stand out before him, reproaching him for disobedience, and asserting its paternal right of control; till slowly, and like a thief, Septimus Hardon clutched the ivy, wet with dew, and glistening in the morning sun, climbed upon the wall, and then stood up and tried to raise the sash. But it resisted his efforts for a while, and then gave way so suddenly, that before he could recover himself, his hand slipped through a pane of glass, which shattered and fell with a musical tinkle inside the chamber, while the intruding hand was cut, and bled profusely.

He bound his handkerchief tightly round his bleeding hand, and then stood trembling, with

the perspiration in large drops upon his forehead, as the blind slowly flapped to and fro, and the lath rapped in a strange ghostly way upon the framework of the window.

For a few minutes Septimus Hardon stopped, leaning against the window-sill, trembling and undecided, till, mustering his strength of mind and body, he slowly drew himself up, climbed within the room, and then as the blind fell back to its place, stood in the presence of the dead, listening to the "rap-rap" of the blind-lath against the window-frame, and a sharp vicious gnawing that proceeded from behind the wainscot of the old house, and all the while not daring to turn his eyes in the direction of the bed whose position he knew so well, and upon which he could feel that the coffin was resting.

Gnaw, gnaw; tear, tear; sharp little teeth savagely working at the thin hard wood, and evidently making rapid progress towards their goal.

The sound was hideous, and the sweat dropped from Septimus Hardon's forehead with a tiny splash upon the bare boards, where he could see

more than one little star-like mark, and then rousing himself, he ran towards the spot from whence the noise proceeded, and kicked furiously at the wainscot, when there was a scuffling noise, followed by a deep stillness, broken only at intervals by the gentle rapping of the blind-lath upon the window-frame.

And there stood the careworn man in his own old room—the old plainly-furnished room that he might have slept in but the previous night, so unaltered was everything, as, with eyes putting off that which he had come to see until the very last, he gazed around. There were the quaint old black-framed prints of Hudibras, whose strange, uncouth figures had frightened him as a boy—figures that, in the half-lights of evening or early morn, he had looked upon until they had seemed to stand forth from the frames as he lay quaking with childish terror; there was the old wall-paper, in whose pattern he had been wont to trace grotesque faces; there again the marbled ceiling, whose blue veins he had been used to follow in their maze-like wanderings,

when he lay fevered and wakeful with some childish ailment; the same strips of lean-looking striped-carpet; the same old hook in the beam, round which the flies darted and circled in summer; the same rickety corner washstand, with its cracked ewer, and quaint water-bottle and glass, which tinkled when a footstep passed along the passage; the fire-board, which blew down on windy nights, and almost frightened him into a fit, while there it was, even now, half-fallen and leaning against a chair, with a faint dust of the old fine soot, just as it used to be, scattered upon the hearthstone; the same drawers, whose old jingling brass knobs caught in his pinafore, and held him that dark night when he let fall the candle, and stood screaming for help; the same shells upon the chimney-piece—shells that of old he had held to his ear to listen to the roaring sea; even the old rush-light shade—big, and pierced with holes—was there, the old shade that used to stand upon the floor in the wash-hand basin, and throw its great hole-pierced shadow all over ceiling and wall—

while each hole formed a glaring eye to stare at him and frighten away sleep.

Familiar sights that made him disbelieve in the lapse of time, and think it impossible that he could be standing there an elderly man; for all his association with the room seemed those first-formed impressions of childhood. But he cast away the dreamy, musing fit; for he felt that he had driven it to the last, and he must look now. Yes; there was his old bed, with the great black-cloth coffin, nearly covered by its lid, now drawn down a little from the head.

“Tap-tap, tap-tap,” went the blind-lath; while outside shone the sun, and through the open window came the cheery twitter of the birds. Within the room Septimus Hardon could hear the heavy beating of his own heart. Then again, close behind him, came the sound of hurried scuffling beyond the wainscot; then a shrill squealing; and directly after, the loud sharp tearing of hungry teeth, gnaw, gnaw, gnaw incessantly, for the scared rats had again returned to the charge.

Septimus Hardon roused himself from his stupor, and kicked angrily at the wainscot, and once again he heard the hurrying rush of the hunger-driven little animals as they fled, and a shuddering sensation ran through his veins as he recalled the past.

And now he nerved himself to approach the bed, and stretched out his hand to remove the coffin-lid; but for some time he stood with his hands resting upon it. A dread had overshadowed him that he was about to gaze upon something too hideous for human eyes to bear; but at last he thrust the covering aside, and it fell upon the bed, when, with swimming head, he clung to the bedstead for a few minutes to save himself from falling. But the tremor passed off, for he was once more roused by the indefatigable gnawing of the rats; and he asked himself how long it would be before they would work their way through the thin oaken panel, and then whether they would attack the coffin.

Gnaw, gnaw, gnaw incessantly, till he once more angrily struck at the wall, when the noise

ceased. And now Septimus Hardon strode firmly up to the bedside and gazed upon his father's face, not hideously disfigured, or frightful to look upon, but pale, calm, stern, with the brow slightly contracted, and, seen there in the twilight of that shaded room, apparently sleeping.

Dead—not sleeping. Gone from him without a word, without a sign, of forgiveness; leaving him a beggar with a name that was fouled and stained for ever in the sight of men. Gone—taking with him a secret of such vital importance; but Septimus Hardon thought not now of all this, for his memory was back amidst those early days when his mother was living, and his father would relax from his stern fits, so that for a while happiness seemed to dwell within their home. Then came the recollection of his mother's death, and the cold indifference into which his father had sunk. Then again all the sorrows and pains were forgotten, and the old man's virtues shone forth, as his shabby, travel-stained son sank upon his knees by the coffin and buried his face in his hands.

The sun streamed through the loose corner of the blind and shone like a golden bar-sinister across the kneeling man ; the sparrows twittered in the eaves, and ever upon the window-frame the blind kept up its monotonous tap, tap, tap, at regular intervals, while at times a puff of light air made it shiver and shudder from top to bottom. But, above all, came from behind the wainscot the incessant gnaw, gnaw, gnaw, as though the rats knew that their time was short, and that their prey would soon be beyond their reach ; gnaw, gnaw, gnaw, as though splintering off large pieces of the woodwork, while now no angrily-stricken blow scared them off ; gnaw, gnaw, gnaw, until little ragged splinters and chips began to be thrust out beneath the skirting-board ; then more, and more, and more, till a tiny, light heap, that a breath would have scattered, appeared close to a ragged hole. Then heap and hole grew larger, and as the noise increased a sharp nose was seen moving quickly, as a rat worked vigorously, till, as it obtained room to tear away at the board, the heap grew bigger, fragments were

thrust out hastily into the room, and at last the little archway afforded space for the passage of the worker, a sharp-eyed, keen-looking, little animal, which, after peering about eagerly for a few moments, darted into the room, darted back again, and then renewed its attack upon the skirting-board until the hole was enlarged.

Then for a while all was silent, but a keen observer might have detected within the darkness the sharp nose of the rat, and the eager glint of its watching orbs. Then came a faint rustle, and the rat seemed to glide out into the room; then another head appeared at the hole, and another lean, vicious animal was out, but a louder tap than usual from the blind sent them darting back to their lair.

Another five minutes and they were out again—one, two, three; another, and another, and another—a swarm of rats, savage with hunger; but now the loud, chirruping squabble of a pair of sparrows which settled on the window-sill scared the little animals once more, and they fled in haste to their corner.

Out again, for all was silent; first one peering into the room, with its black, bead-like eyes scanning the place, then darting back at some false alarm, but out again directly, followed by its fellows, till there was a swarm once more, now running a few feet, now darting back to the hole; and still Septimus Hardon knelt, as he had knelt for hours, motionless beside his father's coffin.

The golden bar shone into and across the room, a bar-sinister no longer, for it played upon the features of the dead, seeming to illumine⁵⁹ them with a smile; the sparrows twittered in the eaves, the faint whistle of a carter, cheering his way with some old minor strain, was heard from the road; the blind still tapped softly and shuddered from top to bottom; but the gnawing sounds from the skirting-board had ceased, and the kneeling man remained motionless by the bedside.

Tap, tap, tap, in a strange warning way, as the shuddering motion of the old blind continued. Warning taps, as if softly made by

unseen watchers—signals to rouse the kneeling figure whose face was buried in his hands, and whose worn, lean fingers touched the black cloth of the coffin; taps that now grew louder, for there was a faint, scratching noise, as of little vicious claws passing over a counterpane.

CHAPTER II.

MEETINGS.

WITH something like the wondering pleasure that must have been felt by the first photographer who applied his developing liquid to a sensitised plate and then saw spring out by magic, as it were, first faint, then stronger lines, feature by feature, the lineaments of a beautiful face, gazed old Matt Space upon Lucy Grey as Time, that wonderful developer, caused her day by day to take more and more the aspect of a beautiful woman. Yesterday almost it seemed to him that she was a mere girl, a child; but the transition had been rapid. True, hers was a time of life when the bud is seen to expand rapidly; but here there had been forcing powers at work. In fact, in quiet self-dependence, thought, and her managing ways,

Lucy had been for years a woman, and the friend and counsellor of her mother in many a sore trial. Familiarity with sorrow, poverty, her step-father's struggles, and their life in the busy streets of London, had all tended to develop the mind of Lucy Grey, who might truly be said never to have known a girlhood: nurse to her little sister and brother in sickness and health, attendant of her ailing mother, housekeeper, cheerer of Septimus Hardon's misery, and now busy worker for the family's support, it were strange indeed if she had not stepped as it were from child to woman, for in such cases as hers years seem secondary.

But the years had not been stationary, for Lucy Grey was now seventeen, and the old printer used to gaze with pride upon the fair girl, who chose him gladly for her companion to and from the warehouse for which she worked.

But Matt was angry and annoyed, for he had been made the half confidant of a secret which galled and worried him. Twenty times a day he vowed that he would have no more of it, and at such times the consumption of his snuff was ter-

rible. There was hardly a lamp-post in Carey-street to which he had not fiercely declared that he would "split," nodding mysteriously the whole while; but night after night, when he met the appealing look of Lucy, all his resolutions faded like mist in the sun, and he would whisper the next post he passed that he was getting to be a fool in his old age.

The old man had carried the letter he received to Lucy, giving it to her at dinner-time, while Mrs. Hardon was lying down; and then furtively watched the eager looks, the flushing cheeks, and tear-wet eyes, as the reader devoured the contents.

"You'll be here to-night, Mr. Space?" said Lucy, looking up. "You'll go with me?"

"Old Matt Space, miss, is your humble servant, and he'll do what you tell him; but he don't like that at all. He don't like secrets;" and the old man pointed to the note. "Why not tell her?" and he nodded towards the inner room.

"No, no," whispered Lucy hurriedly.

"All right, miss, all right. I'll be here at

seven. Be taken bad, I suppose, and slip off for an hour." And at the appointed time the old man hurried from the office where he was employed, at the great risk of being told that he would be wanted no more, and accompanied Lucy to where, in the dusk of evening, she stood talking to the dark, showily-dressed woman, whose agitated, mobile countenance made the paint upon her cheeks look weird and strange. She had hold tightly of Lucy's hand, and more than once old Matt saw her kiss it fondly, clinging to it as if it were her last hold upon innocence and purity.

Twice during their interview the old man advanced, signing that it was time they went, by many a hasty jerk with his thumb; but the appealing looks he encountered sent him muttering back to his former post beneath a lamp, where he stood watching uneasily.

And old Matt had something to watch, too; for twice he saw the villanously-countenanced Mr. Jarker slink by on the opposite side of the way, trying very hard to appear ignorant of a meeting taking place, but failing dismally, for

from time to time his head was turned in the direction, besides which many a passer-by paused to gaze, with something like effrontery, upon the sweet, candid face of Lucy, while more than one seemed disposed to turn back. All this troubled the old man, and made him redouble his watchfulness as he walked a little nearer to the speakers; but he did not see that, some fifty yards down the street, standing in a doorway, there was another watcher, from beneath whose broad white brow a pair of keen gray eyes were fixed uneasily upon the group, with a troubled, puzzled expression.

“God—God bless you!” whispered the woman; “you must go now, my darling!” just as a well-dressed man sauntered back, cigar in hand, and, slightly stooping, addressed some observation to the startled girl; when old Matt, who had been watching his movements and followed close behind, suddenly shouldered him on one side, and so vigorously, that he stepped into the road to save himself from falling. Then there was a shout from a passing cabman, a half-uttered cry,

and the daintily-dressed loungee was rubbing the marks of a muddy wheel from his dark trousers, while old Matt, with a gruff "Come along, miss!" drew Lucy's arm through his own, and with a short, sharp nod to her companion, marched her off.

But Matt did not turn back to see the next change in the scene, or he might have looked upon Mr. William Jarker crossing the road and speaking to the dark woman, who replied fiercely and shortly, as she turned from him in an abrupt manner, but only to return and say a few words quietly ere she hurried off. Then the city dandy, recovered from his fright, followed the steps of old Matt and Lucy, till a firm hand was laid upon his shoulder, when turning, he encountered the calm, fixed gaze of a man of some one- or two-and-thirty, dressed as a clergyman.

"Stand back, sir, or I give you into custody for insulting that young lady," he said, in quiet, hard, measured tones.

"Young what?" was the reply; but there was a something so firm and convincing in the

look of the keen gray eyes upon him, that, muttering inaudibly, the fellow shrank back, and was soon lost in the passing crowd.

The Reverend Arthur Sterne then looked hastily round, to see that Lucy Grey had passed down the next street, to whose corner he hurried, where he could see her nearly at the bottom, with old Matt striding fiercely along. He then turned to look for the woman who had been Lucy's companion, but she had disappeared. However, he walked hastily in the direction she had taken, and searched eagerly for some distance, now thinking that he caught sight of her bonnet on this side, now upon that, but always disappointed; several times he was about to return, but a delusive glimpse of some figure in the distance led him on, till, tired and disheartened, he turned to reach his apartments, when he encountered, first, the ill-looking countenance of Mr. William Jarker, who made a sort of slouching attempt at a bow, and directly after, a quiet-looking individual, with a straw in his mouth and his hands in his pockets, whom Mr.

Sterne passed without notice, though he had recognised the birdcatcher, whose wife he had from time to time visited. But Mr. Sterne was not aware that he had been followed by the ruffian, as a bull-dog would follow his master, or a hound his quarry—though it is disgracing the latter simile to use it. Nor was Mr. Jarker aware that that quiet-looking individual had been following him in turn till he was once more about to track the curate, when for a moment he and the quiet individual stood face to face, apparently without seeing one another; but it was observable that Mr. Jarker immediately went off in quite another direction, while, after slowly twisting his straw and winking to himself, the quiet man slowly took the same route as Mr. Sterne.

CHAPTER III.

ANOTHER FUNERAL.

SEPTIMUS HARDON leaped to his feet, as suddenly a key turned and the bedroom-door opened ; there was a sharp scuffling noise, as of a swarm of rats leaping hurriedly from the bed, and tearing over one another, in their haste to reach the hole ; a wild shriek from a woman, a heavy fall, and then all was again silent.

As soon as he could recall his scattered energies, Septimus Hardon raised the woman's head and bathed her face, when she soon opened her eyes and sat up, gazing at him with a horrified aspect.

“ Hush !” he said softly ; “ don't be alarmed. My name is Hardon ; I came to see my father

for the last time. I think I used to know you in the town?"

"O, yes; I remember you now, sir," stammered the woman; "but you gave me a dreadful turn."

"Hush! Come downstairs now," whispered Septimus, and he motioned her to follow him to the door.

The woman was about to obey, but, glancing round the room, she pointed to the freshly-gnawed wood and the heap of chips.

Septimus shuddered, and they went together and closed the coffin-lid.

"Stop a minute, sir, please," said the woman—a poor cottager's wife from the town, who followed the same road in Somesham adopted by Mrs. Sims of Lincoln's-inn,—“stop a minute, sir, please, and I'll be back directly.” The poor thing trembled so that her teeth chattered, as she hurried away; but she returned in a few minutes with a huge black cat, which struggled from her arms and ran, with dilated eyes, towards the rats' hole, where it softly couched, motion-

less but for the writhings of its lithe tail, as it sat there watching for the coming of its enemies.

There were funeral cake and wine upon the table below, and an extra supply of the former was cut up and sealed in squares of paper, bearing a couple of verses of a psalm, and the pastrycook's name and address as a serious advertisement.

After waiting a couple of hours, most of which he spent wandering about the old house, Septimus Hardon took his old place in the little dining-room, opposite to the sealed-up bureau and cupboards. The undertaker and his man had arrived, and soon after came Doctor Hardon's rival, who had been called in to the deceased. The undertaker knew Septimus and bowed; the surgeon, too, knew him again and shook hands, not being at all surprised to see him there; while he invited him to dinner before he should leave the town. But although Doctor Hardon, who came soon after, well knew Septimus Hardon, he *was* surprised to see him there, and did not shake hands, but started as though someone had struck him a violent blow. Mr. Keening—Keening and Keening—then en-

tered the room, when the gentlemen all took wine in a heavy, impressive way, and talked in a low tone about matters as far removed as possible from the purpose for which they had met together.

Then came the undertaker to ask in a subdued way if any gentleman wished to go up-stairs ; but no gentleman save the son wished to go ; and he stole away to stand and gaze for a few moments upon the calm pale features, and then returned to where the undertaker was distributing gloves of the best black kid, asking the size each gentleman took with a smooth oily courtesy. Scarves were then produced of the richest and stiffest corded silk, cloaks were tied on, and as each mourner was dressed for his part of the performance, he was inspected all round, and from top to toe, by the undertaker before he was allowed to reseal himself. Then more wine, and more subdued conversation followed, interrupted by the grating of wheels upon the gravel drive. Heavy footsteps overhead now ; trampling ; someone slipping upon the stairs, and the balustrade heard to

creak loudly as an exclamation was heard ; a shuffling noise ; more footsteps heavily descending ; a sharp pattering of feet on the passage oil-cloth, and much rustling past the room-door, followed by an interval of a few minutes, and the noise of wheels going and wheels coming ; and then the undertaker stood bowing in the open door, and motioned Septimus Hardon to follow.

This was almost too much for Doctor Hardon, who had ordered that everything possible to make the funeral impressive should be done. The large hearse and two mourning-coaches had been hired expressly from the county-town ; velvet and ostrich plumes were in plenty ; and, as chief mourner, the doctor had reckoned upon a very imposing spectacle, one that should to a certain extent erase the horrors of his brother's end, and help to raise him, the doctor, in the estimation of the inhabitants of Somesham. But now this was spoiled by the coming of the shabby, worn son, towards whom the undertaker had leaned in the belief, in his ignorance, that he was the chief mourner.

Septimus rose, and moved towards the door, while Doctor Hardon hesitated to obey the beckoning finger of the undertaker; but the dread of drawing attention to his tremor made him more himself, and, putting a white-cambrie kerchief to his face, he followed his nephew, to be directly after shut up with him in the mourning-coach. But Septimus noticed him not, as he sat stern and with knitted brow, no muscle betraying the wild emotions struggling within.

The surgeon and solicitor followed in the next coach; and then the funeral procession moved slowly off towards the town, making as great a show as the undertaker's strict adherence to his employer's orders could effect. Doctor Hardon said he wished to keep up appearances for his dear brother's sake; but he had not reckoned upon the presence of the stern, careworn man by his side, and he shrank into his corner of the mourning-coach, angry, but at the same time fearful lest a scene might ensue which should damage his reputation in the good town of Somesham; besides, it would have been so painful to the feelings

of his three daughters—he only thought of three, even though one was married and two resided at a distance. Nothing could have been more unfortunate than the appearance of Septimus at such a time, and during the silent ride the doctor's wishes were anything but loving towards his nephew ; while upon reaching the church the gall of bitterness was made more bitter, for the doctor again found himself made of secondary importance by Septimus, who seemed to have roused himself into action for the time, and strode on in front, close behind the coffin, to take his place in the church so crowded with familiar recollections. There, bowed down in the same pew, but with very different thoughts, uncle and nephew listened to the service ere they stood together by the bricked vault prepared for the remains of old Octavius, and here again the doctor seemed to have shrunk into a nonentity, for every eye was fixed upon the shabby mourner by his side.

The clergyman had concluded, and, closing his book, was slowly walking away ; the clerk had

followed, and at the church-gate the foremost mourning-coach stood waiting, with a crowd of children and idlers around, the hearse being drawn up at a distance, already half denuded of its plumes by one of the deputies of the furnisher. There was a crowd, too, thickly clustered amidst grave and tombstone in the churchyard, for plenty of interest attached to the death of old Octavius Hardon, and the people of Somesham seemed bound to see the matter to the end.

Nothing now remained for the mourners but to take a last glance at the coffin and come away. Septimus had stood for a few moments looking down into the vault, with the stern aspect of resolution fading from his face, to give way to one of helpless misery, when, turning to leave, he encountered the mourning brother advancing with drooping head and raised handkerchief to take his farewell look.

Septimus Hardon shrank back as from a serpent, and made room for his uncle to pass; but the next moment a sudden rage possessed him, and, stepping forward, he laid a hand upon the

doctor's shoulder, whispering a few words in his ear.

Hastily confronting his nephew, the doctor turned, when, shaking a threatening finger in his face, Septimus exclaimed :

“Hypocrite ! I know—”

But before he could finish the sentence, the doctor started back as if to avoid the threatening hand ; his foot slipped upon the very edge of one of the boards, and the next moment, before a hand could be stretched out to save him, he fell with a crash into the vault.

For a while no one moved, a thrill of horror running through the assembled crowd ; but soon help in plenty was there to raise the fallen man from the coffin upon which he lay, apparently senseless, and amidst a buzz of suggestions the sexton nimbly descended, rope in hand, and, slipping the strong cord around the doctor's chest, he was dragged out and borne to the waiting coach.

Septimus, shocked, and almost paralysed at the effect of his threatening gesture, stood for a few minutes looking on, till, seeing relief afforded

to the fallen man, he turned slowly away, people giving place right and left to allow him to pass. On reaching the second coach, he hastily disencumbered himself of his trappings of woe, and threw them to the astonished man at the door, who had never before witnessed such unseemly conduct at a funeral. Then, after another hasty glance towards the crowd around his uncle, Septimus strode off in the direction of the County Arms; while, gaping, talking, and wondering, the people slowly dispersed, saving such as followed the coach to the doctor's residence in the High-street, where they hung about, clinging helplessly to the iron railings, and staring at the dining-room windows, until Mr. Brande, the surgeon, and Mr. Keening, the solicitor, came out together, looking very important, and walked down the street; when several of the railing barnacles followed at a distance, as if the gentlemen had brought out a printed account of the gossip-engendering scene in their pockets ready for distribution.

With his mourning habiliments Septimus Hardon seemed to have cast off the interest the

crowd might be supposed to have taken in him ; for no one followed the thin shabby man in dusty clothes and battered hat, as he strode on, till abreast of the old inn, where he paused, as if about to enter ; but the next moment, shaking his head wearily, he walked on, and was soon past the first mile-stone on his way to the great city.

CHAPTER IV.

AFTER A LAPSE.

“Do, sir?” exclaimed old Matt, pausing in his occupation of pulling the string to make a lathen figure throw out arms and legs for the delectation of little Tom,—“do, sir? Why, what I’ve always told you, and you say the parson’s told you,—go in for it, you’ve nothing to lose; so if anything happens, you must win. A year last spring now since I come running in here with that par. thinking I’d made your fortune for you, sir; and now—Look there, what you’ve done, you’ve pulled one of his legs off!”—This in a parenthesis to the little boy between his knees.—“And where are you? Certainly, you get on a bit with the writing, sir; but if it was me I couldn’t have settled down without making him prove his words.”

“But, you see,” said Septimus, looking up from

his copying, "I'm not clever, I'm not a business man; and what could I do without money for legal advice? It's a sad life this; and ours is, and always was, a miserable family, and my uncle's too. Look at him: his children are always away, while Agnes came to us through some love-affair with the assistant, and soon after I came away she disappeared, and has never been heard of since. Did you speak?"

"No," said Matt, whose face was puckered up, while he had been trying to catch the eye of Lucy, who sat at the window busily preparing some work for a bright new sewing-machine which had lately been supplied to her from the warehouse where she was employed.

"He has the money," continued Septimus, "but that can't compensate for the loss of his child. Poor Agnes!"

"Don't speak of her," exclaimed Mrs. Septimus angrily, "she was a very weak, bad woman, and—"

"Hush!" said Septimus sternly, "we are all weak; and who made us judges?"

Mrs. Septimus fidgeted about in her easy-chair, looking nettled and angry as she sat near the window, while with flushed cheek Lucy bent lower and lower over her work, once only catching Matt's eye, when the old man looked so alarmingly mysterious that the flush upon her face deepened, and she rose and left the room.

"You see, sir," said Matt, continuing a conversation that had evidently been broken off, "it's been let go by so long now, when steps ought to have been taken at once. No offence meant—you won't be put out if I speak plain?"

Septimus shook his head, and went on copying.

"You see," said Matt, "you ought to have gone to Doctors' Commons, and entered a something against your uncle, and done a something else, and had a lawyer to engage counsel, and then this precious uncle of yours couldn't have touched the property till the matter had been tried in the Court of Probate; when, of course, you must have come out with flying colours. But here, you see, you do nothing;

first letting one month slip away, and then another, and all the while he goes to work, gets uninterrupted possession, sticks tighter and tighter to it, and for aught you know, he's spent it all by this time. You ought, you know, to have carried on the war at once."

"And about the sinews?" said Septimus drearily, without raising his head.

"Blame them sinews!" cried the old man; "they're about the tightest, and hardest, and toughest things in the whole world. It seems to me, you know, sir, thinking it over—and I've had it in bed with me scores of nights—it seems to me that your uncle rather reckoned on his meeting no opposition, and on your—snuff, snuff, snuff," muttered the old man in a confused way, as he fumbled about in his pockets.

"Say it out, Matt," said Septimus with a sad smile, "my weakness—no doubt of it, for he could never have believed his own words."

"Well, that was the word, certainly, sir," said Matt; "and after all your fuss, I don't know that a man's any the better for being strong,

mind you. I wasn't going to say weakness, for I was hanging fire for a word that meant the same with the corners rubbed off a bit; but there wasn't letter enough in the case to make it up."

"Can't help it, Matt," said Septimus, removing a hair from his pen by wiping it upon his coat-tail, and then smearing his forehead with his inky fingers, ready for Lucy, who entered the room directly after, to take his careworn head upon her arm, wet a corner of her handkerchief between her rosy lips, and then wipe away the obstinate smear—Septimus the while as still and patient as possible, till the fair girl concluded her performance with a kiss, when he went on with his task. "Exors—ecutors—and assigns," muttered Septimus, writing. "Can't help it, Matt, I suppose it's my nature to be weak."

"And let everyone kick you," said Matt to himself.—"Well, sir," he continued aloud, "it's my belief that this uncle of yours, not to put too fine a point upon it, is a rogue. He's a deep one, that's what he is; but then, you know, he

isn't the only deep one in the world, and if you'd begun when you should have done—there, I won't say so any more," he exclaimed hastily, for Septimus made an impatient movement. "Now, you see, you've taken this sudden whim—very well, sir, all right—we've talked you into it, say then—and you mean now to see if you can't go on with the matter. Better late than never, say I; so now, how does it stand? He has possession, and that's what they call nine points of the law; and he's had possession for above a year, and you haven't taken a step to dispute his right.—Well, I can't go into the thing without speaking of the rights and wrongs of it, can I?" exclaimed the old man in an injured tone, for Septimus shuffled nervously in his seat.

"There, go on!" said Septimus.

"But, there, p'raps I'm making too free," said the old man, snatching at the string so angrily that he broke the other leg of the figure he had brought the child.—"Never mind, my man," he whispered; "I'll bring you such a good un next time I come."

“Go on, Matt,” said Septimus quietly; “you ought to make allowances for me.”

“So I do, sir, so I do—heaps,” cried the old man eagerly.

“We have not so many friends,” continued Septimus, laying down his pen and stretching out his hand, “that we can afford to behave slightly to their advice, even if it is unpalatable.”

Old Matt took the proffered hand, and shook it warmly, before going on with his subject.

“Well, sir,” said Matt, “you say he told you out flat that you were a—a—well, you know what I mean.”

“Yes, yes,” said Septimus drearily, for he had so familiarised himself in thought with the word, that it had ceased to bring up an indignant flush to his cheek.

“Well,” said Matt, “then the whole of our work—I say ‘our,’ you know—”

Septimus nodded.

“The whole of our work consists in proving him false.”

“Exactly,” said Septimus, sticking his pen behind his ear; “but how?”

“Documentary evidence,” said the old man, “that’s it; documentary evidence,” and he took snuff loudly. “Marriage stiffikits, baptism registers, and so on. Let’s see; I don’t think there was any regular registration in those days. Now then, to begin with, sir. Where were your father and mother married?—that is, if they were,” muttered the old man in what was meant for an undertone, but Septimus heard the words.

“O yes,” he said quietly, “they were married in the City.”

“Very good,” said Matt. “Then suppose we get a copy of the marriage stiffikit, sworn to and witnessed, how then?”

“Well, that proves the marriage,” said Septimus.

“To be sure,” said Matt; “but then you’ll find he bases his claim upon your being born before. You don’t think he denies that your father and mother were married? He don’t, does he?”

“No,” said Septimus wearily, as he opened a pocket-book and drew out a frayed and broken letter, which had separated here and there in the folds from frequent reference. “You are right, Matt,” he said, after reading a few lines. “The marriage register would be no good.”

“Yes, it would,” said Matt; “it’s documentary evidence, and it will be one brick in the tower we want to build up; so don’t you get sneezing at it because it ain’t everything. It will be one thing; and so far so good, when we get it. You see it’s a ticklish thing, and before you put it in a solicitor’s hands—a respectable solicitor’s hands, for cheap law’s the dearest thing in Lincoln’s-inn—you must have something to show him. Now, so far so good, only recollect your uncle’s on firm ground, while as yet you’re nowhere. Now say we go to a good solicitor. ‘Were you born in wedlock?’ says he. ‘Yes,’ says you. ‘Now then,’ says he, ‘prove it.’ ”

Septimus sighed, and began to wonder whether his uncle was right.

“Now, then,” said Matt, “family Bible with birth in, eh?”

“We had one, full of plates,” said Septimus, recalling the old Sunday afternoons, when he had leaned over the table, amusing himself with the engravings; “but there were no entries in it, only my grandfather’s name. I fancy, though, now you mention it, my father had a little pocket-Bible with some entries in, but I never took particular notice.”

“Rotten reed—a rotten reed,” said the old man. “You are not sure; and even if you were, your uncle’s been foxy enough to hunt the place over and over, and that book’s gone up the chimney in smoke, or under the grate in ashes, long enough ago. No will, you say?”

“Not that I could hear of,” said Septimus.

“We might, p'r'aps, find the nurse, or doctor, or some old friend; but then, unless they can bring up documentary evidence, 'tain't much good. You know, when old folks are made to swear about things that took place fifty years ago, people shake their heads and think about failing

memories, and so on. You see we must have something strong to work upon. If we could get the date of your birth, and the marriage stiffikit, we should be all right, shouldn't we?"

"Yes, they would prove all we want," said Septimus.

"Exactly so," said Matt; "and if we couldn't get the date of your birth, how about date of baptism?"

"That would do just as well," exclaimed Septimus.

"No, it wouldn't," said the old man, "without it's got in how old you were when the parson made a cross on your forehead—eh?"

Septimus was damped directly.

"It's no use to be sanguine, you know, sir. What we've got to do is to expect nothing, and then all we do get is clear profit. Now, where were you baptised—do you know that?"

"Yes," said Septimus.

"Well, that's all right, if it contains the entry of your age at the time, but we won't be sure;

and if it does, you see if your uncle don't bring someone to swear it's false, and that they nursed you a twelvemonth before you really were born. Most likely, you know, there'd be half-a-score done at the same time as yours, and they never asked your age. I don't say so, you know, only that perhaps it was so. Now, what do you call your birthday, sir?"

"Tenth of January 17—," said Septimus.

"Very good, sir; but then, that's only what you say, mind, and a bare word's not worth much in a court of law when a case is being tried. 'Tis,' says you. 'Tisn't,' says your uncle, who's rich, and prosperous, and respectable, and has the money, and lives in a big house, with plenty of well-to-do friends round him. 'Prove your case,' says the judge to you; and mind you, sir, this is the ticklish point; it ain't a question of who's to have your father's money. He's got it, and it's a question of your turning him out. So, 'Prove your case,' says the judge. 'You've left this man in possession for a year, and now you say he does not hold

the property lawfully. Prove your case.' 'Can't my lord,' says you—'no documentary evidence.' And now do you know what the judge would say?"

Septimus shook his head dismally.

"'Judgment for the defendant'—that's your uncle, you know." And then, as if highly satisfied with his logical mode of putting the case, Matt snapped his fingers loudly after a large pinch of snuff.

"But," said Mrs. Septimus, "my doctor told me that he always kept a register of all the births he attended."

Mrs. Septimus said no more, for old Matt's fist went down upon the table with a bang that made some of the ink leap from the stand, but fortunately not upon Septimus Hardon's clean sheets of paper.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am!" cried Matt, hurriedly sopping up the ink with his wisp of a handkerchief; "but blame me if I don't wish I'd been born a woman! trust them for getting to the bottom of everything. Why, Lord bless you,

sir, there you are—there's the case in a nutshell!—that's the matter hit right in the bull's-eye! Why didn't you begin about it before? You're right as a trivet. There's the date of the marriage, and there's the doctor's book—such-and-such a day, such-and-such a time; medicine and attendance, two pound twelve shillings and sixpence. Hallo!" exclaimed Matt, scratching his head, "that comes very pat; where did I hear those words before? But there, look here, sir; I think we've got hold of the right end of the tangle, and here it is. You go down to Some-sham and tell nunky how it stands. 'Here we are,' says you, 'and now give up peaceable and quiet, and I'll say nothing at all about what's gone by.' Of course he won't, and begins to talk big about kicking out of the house, and all that sort of thing. 'Two can play at that,' says you; and as he won't be civil, he must have it hot. Back you come; put it in a decent solicitor's hands; with your good documentary evidence out he goes—in you go; and my di'mond has a pony with a long silky tail; Miss Lucy

a carriage, and missis here an invalid chair, and old Matt to push it—eh, ma'am?"

"But about finding the doctor," said Septimus sadly.

"Well, yes—true, to be sure," said Matt, over a fresh pinch of snuff; "but I think we can manage that part, sir. Don't you see, we can tell our road now we've got our line cut out; and we've only got it to do. There's some pye in the case, of course, but we can correct as we go on, eh? There's a doctors' directory, and we can soon find him.

"There's a hitch directly," said Septimus. "I don't know his name."

"Phillips!" exclaimed Mrs. Hardon excitedly.

"There we are again," cried Matt; "who'd be without a good partner?"

"But how do you know?" said Septimus.

"I remember in your mother's last illness," said Mrs. Septimus, "that she told me how she longed for her old doctor, for she felt sure Mr. Thomas Hardon did not understand her complaint; and that was the first cause of disagreement be-

tween your father and Dr. Hardon. I heard your father tell him afterwards that he had killed his sister, and to leave the house."

"But the name?" said Septimus, anxious to change the conversation.

"Phillips—the same as my own; and that was why it made an impression upon my memory."

"Talk about cards to play, sir!" cried Matt, "why, that's winning: your partner has played the leading trump."

Septimus Hardon rose from his seat to begin anxiously pacing up and down the room. He could see plainly enough the value of the position he was nerving himself to fight for, but he shrank, as he had shrunk again and again, from the exposure certain, whether he succeeded or not. Vacillating in the extreme, he was at one time telling himself that it was his duty to try and clear his mother's fame, though the next moment would find him shrinking from the task, while his brow wrinkled up as he sighed and looked from face to face, lastly on that of old Matt, who,

having relieved himself of the child, was taking snuff extravagantly, and chuckling and rubbing his hands in anticipation of the coming triumph.

“Now, sir,” he said upon catching the troubled man’s eye, “about this doctor.”

“Dead before now,” said Septimus. “Allowing him to have been quite young for a doctor, he would be eighty now, and how few men reach that age!”

“Pooh! nonsense!” cried Matt; “scores do—hundreds do—ninety either. Eighty? Pooh! nothing! youth, sir. Why, I’m past sixty, and see what a boy I look, eh? Why, I believe Miss Lucy would pick me out from scores to take care of her,—wouldn’t you, miss?”

Lucy looked up from her work, nodded and smiled.

“But now business,” said the old man.—“Where did you live, sir, before you went down in the country?”

“Finsbury,” said Septimus.

“And you were born there, eh?”

“I believe so,” said Septimus, wondering in

his own mind whether it was worth all this trouble, perhaps to gain nothing.

“To be sure,” cried Matt; “and now we shall soon find it out. Brass plate on the door — ‘Mr. Phillips, Surgeon;’ big lamp sticking out, red bull’s-eye one side, green t’other, like railway signals; ‘danger’ and ‘all right’ to the people in the street.”

Old Matt rose to go, after appointing to meet Septimus on the following morning to take the first steps for obtaining the “documentary evidence” so necessary for their future plans.

“Ten to the moment, you’ll see me, sir,” said Matt. “Good afternoon, ma’am, and — Ah, Miss Lucy’s gone!”

But Septimus only sighed, and sat down once more to his weary copying, sheets of which he so often spoiled by letting his thoughts wander from the task in hand.

“No more business in him, sir,” said Matt as he descended the stairs, “than — Ah, here we are, then! Thought I was going away with-

out seeing you again, miss ;” for he had encountered Lucy upon the stairs.

“Hush !” she whispered, “I only wanted to ask you to please be careful. I was so frightened this afternoon.”

Old Matt buttoned up his coat as tightly as if his honour were inside it, pursed up his lips, nodded his head seriously, and then laying one finger upon the side of his nose he shuffled off, looking as mysterious as if he were the repository of state secrets, and ready to bid defiance to all the racks and thumbscrews of the good old times.

Lucy Grey stood for a minute gazing after the shabby figure, and then, turning to ascend, she coloured slightly upon finding herself face to face with the old Frenchwoman who occupied the attic floor, and who now, with a sneering smile upon her thin lips and an inquisitive light peering from her half-closed eyes, looked at her, and then passed softly and silently as a cat down the stairs without saying a word.

CHAPTER V.

HOMES IN LONDON.

BENNETT'S-RENTS still upon that day—a bright breezy day—when for a whole hour the god that kisseth carrion shone down into the court to lick up every trace of green damp and moisture from the foul, broken pavement. There was a pump in Bennett's-rents, and a channel ran down the centre of the paving, whose broken slabs rose and fell in wet weather to the passing step, spurting out little founts of dirty water, while the channel itself was choked, from being turned into a receptacle for the superfluous odds and ends of the inhabitants—to wit: potato, turnip, and carrot peelings; the shells of whelks, periwinkles, mussels, and crabs; egg-shells were at times seen there, as also the nacreous cover-

ing of the oyster, but not as the débris of banquets, since these latter were only brought in by the grotto-building children, and the former thrown out by the jobbing bookbinder's-finisher when robbed of their albumen for purposes of trade. Heads, tails, and the vertebræ of plaice, or the real Yarmouth bloater, were common objects of the shore. Babies had been seen in that channel, which possessed a certain charm from its safety, since the child that rolled in rolled no farther. It was the favourite resort of the small fry of the neighbourhood,—a neighbourhood that rejoiced in small children, and big babies of an elastic nature, which prevented falls and contusions from stopping their growth,—for the refuse in that channel could be raked about and poked at with bits of stick to the formation of dams, where walnut cock-boats could be sailed, or mussel-prows launched; and occasional visitants from as far off as Lower Serles-place had been known to perch there and peck, for the channel was famed for its ample supply of impromptu playthings for the little savages

of the place. A large lobster-claw found therein had formed the coral of Dredge minor, whose father worked at Covent-garden Market, and never slept at home by night. Little Jenny Perkins wore a necklace composed of periwinkle-shells; while whelk-shells, stuck at the end of thick pieces of firewood, and previously filled with peas, formed rattles that were indestructible.

Like Lower Serles-place, Bennett's-rents was famous for its prolific inhabitants. Long as daylight lasted, there was a dense small population of half-dressed aborigines, hooting, racing about, playing, and quarrelling, aided in their efforts by levies from others of the rags of Lincoln's-inn. Why called Bennett's-rents was not obvious, though it might have been from the hideous cracks and seams in the frouzy old houses, whose windows looked as if they had been in a brown-paper-and-rag war, in which glass had suffered a terrible defeat, and submitted now, with an ill grace, to the presence of the new settlers.

But the children did not have the channel

all to themselves, for at early dawn the pigeons from the housetops paid it visits, and, in spite of broken, dissipated-looking chimney-pots, falling-out mortar, and shattered, soot-covered tiles, there were many soft-eyed, iridescent-hued birds dwelling upon the roofs of the houses in Bennett's-rents; and, more especially upon Sunday mornings, an observer from some high edifice might have seen dirty-faced men, in hairy caps, rising out of trap-doors in roofs, like "Mr. F.'s aunt" through the factory-floor, and, when half way out, and forming prominent objects among little wildernesses of sooty, lath-made cages and traps, amusing themselves by waving red-cotton handkerchiefs tied to the end of sticks, for the purpose of keeping their flights of pigeons high in air.

A rumour had spread through the court that something was to be seen in the neighbouring street, when out trooped the children from the narrow entrance, and comparative silence reigned, till place and echoes were alike mocked by a man with his cry of "Rag—bone!" but his was

labour in vain : he took nothing further from the Rents to glut the shop of Mrs. Slagg, and, reaching the end of the place, he departed with his bag still light, and the court knew him no more that day, though there were rags enough in every house to have filled his sack again and again, and drawn down the index of his portable weighing-machine to the furthest limit. Still there was another sound to be heard, for Mr. William Jarker, of the heavy jaw, flattened nose, and general bull-dog aspect, was above his attic, whistling to his pigeons, as the Reverend Arthur Sterne stood by the reeking channel, gazing up into the strip of blue sky above his head, and following the circling flight of the birds as he muttered sadly to himself, "O, that I had wings like a dove ; for then would I fly away and be at rest !" but the next instant he smiled sadly, as he recalled work undone, duties to perform, and then thought of the rest and fate of these birds, wondering, too, how it came that they should form the "fancy" of the roughest of the rough. Then he paused with his foot

upon the threshold of the house where Septimus Hardon lodged, for there, in the hot, close London court, came gushing down in tones of purest liquid melody, the wild, heaven-gate trill of a lark: "Tsweet-tsweet-tsweet-tsweet!" every trill an intoxicating, magic draught, drunk in by the ear, and—a very opium—bearing the hearer far, far away to green fields, shady woodlands, golden hill-sides, and sparkling brooks; louder, louder and more rapturous, thrilling the air around; rising and falling, echoing from far and near, but ever sweet and pure, even joyous at times; and praise the song of the wild bird as you may, there is that in the trill of its caged brother in some close London alley that shall sound the sweeter in the sadness engendered by the surroundings, for it whispers of brighter scenes and purer homes, bearing you with it far, far away from the misery where you stay.

Even Bill Jarker ceased waving his handkerchief, took his short, black pipe from his mouth, and listened; the curate thought of days when, with a soft white hand in his, he had

wandered over the downs, listening to those ever-sweet English notes; while from the window above was stretched forth the fair, shapely head of Lucy Grey, her eyes sparkling, and lips apart, as if to command silence; and then, as the curate looked up, there was a slight start, a faint flush of colour in the girl's pale cheeks, and her head was quickly withdrawn.

A tall, slight, careworn man was the curate of St. Magdalen's; hair sprinkled with gray, deep lines crossing his brow, and 'yet there was a smile of ineffable sweetness lingering about his mouth—a smile which, far from telling of weakness, whispered of sorrow, tenderness, patience, and charity.

The few minutes of tranquillity had passed. The door of the house stood open—as, in fact, did that of every other house in the thickly-inhabited court; the children began to troop back, Bill Jarker took to his pipe and pigeon-flying, and with thoughts trembling between the ideal and the real, the curate entered the door before him.

It was not a Saturday, or he would have found

the ascent of the stairs troublesome ; but he well knew the manners and customs of the natives, and abstained from making his visits on that day of the week, for on Saturdays there was a rule carried out (one set in force by the landlady), that the attics cleaned down to the second floor, the second floor to the first, the first floor to the passage, which last portion fell to the lot of the occupants of the parlours, front and back—two families who took it in turns to make the dirt upon the said passage wet, and then to smear it from side to side with a flannel, so that the boards always wore the aspect of having been newly hearthstoned with a lump of brown clay, if the simile will stand. Consequently, upon this seventh day of the week, when the lodgers were busy, and Mrs. Sims could be heard sniffing as she “did Hardons’ bit,” the journey upwards was dangerous, for if the traveller avoided the snares and pitfalls formed by divers pails and brown pans, or even, maybe, a half-gallon can from the public at the corner if the pail was engaged ; if he saved himself from slipping on the sloping, wet boards, and fell over no

kneeling scrubber in a dark corner, he most certainly heard low-muttered abuse heaped upon his head for “trapesing” over the newly-cleaned stairs—abuse direct or indirect, according to the quality of the traveller.

Not, then, being a Saturday, Mr. Sterne entered the house known as No. 7—by tradition only, for the brass number, after being spun round by one pin for some months, suddenly disappeared—passed along to the worn stairs, two flights of which he ascended, creaking and cracking the while beneath his weight, and every one sloping, so that it seemed hanging to the wall to save itself from falling. He paused for an instant upon the landing opposite Septimus Hardon’s rooms, and listened to the rapid beating “click-click” of Lucy’s sewing-machine; then up two more flights; and again, without pause, up two more, which groaned with weakness and old age; while sunken door-frames, doors that would not shut, and various other indications, told of the insecure condition of the house. And now once more he paused upon the top landing, where some

domestic spider had spun a web of string, stretching it from rusty nail to rusty nail, for the purpose of drying clothes—garments now, fortunately for the visitor, absent.

Here fell upon the ear the twitterings of many birds, and the curate's face again lighted up as the song of the lark once more rang out loud and clear, apparently from outside the window of the attic before whose door he stood. But his reverie was interrupted by a sharp shrill voice, which he could hear at intervals giving orders in a quick angry tone. Then followed the lashing of a whip, a loud yelp, or the occasional rapid beat of a dog's tail upon the floor. At last, turning the handle of the rickety door, the visitor entered.

“*En avant! Halte là! Ah-h-h! bête! O, 'tis monsieur,*” were the words which greeted Mr. Sterne as he entered the sloping-roofed attic, one side of which was almost entirely window—old lead-framed lattice, mended in every conceivable way with pasted paper and book-covers; and there, in the middle of the worn floor, stood the thin, sharp-faced woman of the cellar, holding in one

hand a whip, in the other a hoop; while two half-shaven French poodle-dogs crouched at her feet. Seated by the open window surrounded by bird-cages, conspicuous among which was that of the lark whose notes enlivened the court, was a sal-low, dark-haired, dark-eyed youth, eager-looking and well-featured, but sadly deformed, for his head seemed to rest upon his shoulders, and the leg twisted round the crutch which leaned against his chair was miserably attenuated.

“*Bon jour!* How are the pupils, Madame la Mère?” said the curate, taking a broken chair and seating himself.

“*Bête, bête, bête!*” hissed the woman, making feigned cuts with her little whip at the crouching dogs, which yelped miserably as they shrunk closer to the boards. “Ah, what you deserve!” she said.

“And how are the birds, Jean?” continued the visitor, addressing the young man, who was looking at him half-askance. “Your lark gives me the heartache, and sets me longing for the bright country.”

The curate had touched the right chord, for the youth's face brightened into a pleasant smile directly.

"Does he not sing!" he said, with a slight French accent; and he leaned towards the cage where the bird, with crest erect, was breasting the wooden bars, and gazing with bright bead-like eyes up at the blue sky; but as soon as the cripple's finger was inserted between the bars, the bird pecked at it playfully, fluttered its wings, and then, with head on one side, stood looking keenly at its master.

"O yes, he sings," hissed the woman; "but he is obstinate, is Jean; he should sell his bird, and make money, and not let his poor *mère* always keep him."

"Pst, pst!" ejaculated Jean, frowning upon his mother; but she only stamped one foot angrily, and continued:

"He is *bête* and obstinate. The doll downstairs with the needle-machine loves the bird, and she would buy it, and it is worth four shillings; but Jean will that his mother seek his

bread for him in de street, wis de stupid dogs ; and they are *bête*, and will not learn nosing at all. *Allez donc !*”

As the woman grew more voluble in her speech, she passed from tolerable English to words with a broader and broader accent, till the command given at last to the dogs, each word being accompanied by a sharp cut of the whip, when the animals rose upon their hind-legs, drooped their fore-paws, and then subsided once more into their natural posture, but now to bend their fore-legs, as if kneeling. Then they rose again, drooped, and afterwards meekly crossed, their paws, winking their eyes dolefully the while, and, with an aspect of gravity made absurd, walked slowly off to separate corners of the room, where they again went down upon all-fours, and then sat wistfully winking at and watching their task-mistress.

“ See, then !” she exclaimed, in her harsh shrill voice. “ They would not do it, though I try thousand time ; but now the task is ended they walk. Ah-h-h !”

The cut in the air which accompanied the ex-

clamation might have fallen upon the dogs themselves, for the miserable little objects yelped as they saw it fall, and, as if moved by one muscle, laid their heads against the whitewashed wall till, seeing themselves unnoticed, they curled up, but never for a moment took their blinking eyes off their mistress.

Amidst much muttering, and with many frowns and short sharp shakes of the head, while her lips were pressed closely together, the woman, after much fumbling in her pocket, drew forth a partly-knitted stocking; when, sitting down, she began furiously clicking her needles, watching the while, with half-closed eyes, the curate and her son.

“So, then, you will not sell your lark, Jean?” said Mr. Sterne.

The cripple knit his brow slightly, shook his head, and then drawing a long, delicate, girlish finger over the bars of his favourite’s cage, the lark set up its crest, twittered, fluttered its wings, and again pecked at the finger.

“No, no, no,” he said softly; “why does

she complain? I would work if I could; but I sell and make money of these, though it seems cruel to keep them shut up, and they beat themselves against their prison-bars to get out into the free air and the green woods. And I'm sorry for them when the little breasts grow bare, and the feathers lie in the bottom of the cage; and she says—*ma mère* there—that I am *bête*."

The woman seemed to compress every feature, as she shook her head fiercely, and went on with her knitting.

"Look!" continued Jean softly, as he smiled and pointed rapidly from cage to cage, "canaries, linnets, redpoles, goldfinches, and a blackbird. The thrush broke his heart with singing, they said—the birdcatchers—but it was not that: I know why. I have sold four birds this week; but I keep the lark; he is a favourite."

"Bah!" ejaculated the mother softly; "but he is *bête*;" when, as the curate turned, she was bending over her knitting, shaking her head and frowning, while she stabbed fiercely again and again at the worsted ball till it was transfixed by

her needle, when she replaced the ball in her pocket, where the first drag she gave at the thread drew the ball from its place and it rolled on the floor. "Ah! good dog, *bon chien!*" she cried, as one of the poodles ran forward, caught the errant ball, and bore it to his mistress, returning immediately to his corner; but not to be unrewarded, for the woman rose, and forcing up the sliding socket, caused a little scrap of tallow-candle end to shoot out of a tin-candlestick as from a gun, when, receiving permission, the dog snatched it from the floor, and devoured the savoury morsel in its corner.

"But he should sell the lark, monsieur," said the woman.

"Hush, *ma mère*," said the cripple angrily; "the bird is not to sell."

The mother shrugged her shoulders, and clicked her needles furiously.

"We all have our loves and likes, madame," said the curate quietly.

"O, yes, yes, you rich; but we poor? No. We must live, and eat and drink, and have clothes;

and Jean, there, has ruined me in medicine. What do we want with favourites, we poor? But that they help to keep us, I would sell the dogs. We are all slaves here, we poor; and we sell ourselves, our work, our hands, our beauty, some of us,—is it not so? and you rich buy,—or we starve. It is a bad world for us old and ugly. I am not like the doll upon the floor down-stairs.”

A sharp angry glance passed between mother and son, as the former rose from her seat, and with a short quick step left the room, driving back the dogs as they tried to follow; while it was evident that her words jarred painfully upon the curate. “Our beauty, some of us,” seemed to ring in his ears again and again, and he could not help associating these words with the latter part of her speech.

“How do you get your birds, Jean?” said the curate, making an effort, and breaking the silence.

“From him,” said the young man, nodding across the court to where Bill Jarker sat half out of his trap-door, still keeping up his pigeons, for

a stray was in sight, and he was in hopes of an amalgamation, in spite of the efforts being made by neighbouring flights. "From him : he goes into the country with his nets—far off, where the green trees wave, while I can only read of them. But the book ; did you bring the book ?"

Thinking of other birds breasting their prison-bars : now of the fair bright face that he had seen at the window below, now of that of the cripple before him, the curate produced a volume from his pocket, and smiled as he watched the glittering eyes and eager aspect of the young man, as, hastily grasping the volume, he gazed with avidity upon the title.

"You love reading, then, Jean?" said the curate.

"Yes, yes," cried the cripple. "What could I do without it? Always here; for I cannot walk much—only about the room. Ah, no! I could not live without reading—and my birds. She is good and kind," he continued, nodding towards the door; "but we are poor, and it makes her angry and jealous."

The lark burst forth with one of its sweetest strains as it heard its master's voice, and then, rising, the curate left the attic, closing the door after him slowly, and peering through the narrowing slit to look upon the cripple eagerly devouring a page of the work he had brought.

The Frenchwoman was upon the first landing, and saluted the curate with a sinister meaning smile as he passed her and thoughtfully descended.

"But he is mean, I tell you," cried *ma mère* angrily, as she once more stood beside her son. "What does he give us but words—words which are worth nothing? But what is that? My faith, a book he brought you? You shall not read; it makes you silly, and to forget your mother, who does so much for you. But I will!"

"Ah!" cried Jean, painfully starting from his seat, and snatching back the volume, and just in time, for the next moment would have seen it flying from the open window.

"Then I will sell the lark when you are asleep," cried the woman spitefully.

The youth's eyes glittered, as, with an angry look, he hissed between his teeth, "Then I will kill the dogs!" But the anger passed from his countenance in a few moments, and smiling softly, he said, "No, no, *ma mère*; you would not sell my poor bird, because I love it, and it would hurt me;" and then, casting down her knitting, the woman sprang across the room, throwing her arms round the cripple, and kissing him passionately, calling him by every endearing name, as she parted the hair from his broad forehead, and gazed in his bright dark eyes with all a mother's fondness.

But the curate heard nothing of this—nothing but the loud song of the lark, which rang through the house—as slowly and thoughtfully he descended the worn and creaking stairs, while the woman's words seemed to keep repeating themselves in a slow measured way, vibrating in his ears, and troubling him sorely with their cutting meaning; and more than once he found himself forming with his lips, "Our beauty, some of us."

CHAPTER VI.

SHADES.

THE lark was silent once more ; and now from the open door of the first-floor, rising and falling, with a loud and rapid “click, click, click,” came the sound of Lucy Grey’s sewing-machine—“click, click,” the sharp pulsations of the little throbbing engine, whose needle darted in and out of the soft material held beneath it by those white fingers. But as one of the stairs gave a louder crack than ordinary, the machine stopped, and the quiet, earnest, watching face of Lucy Grey appeared at the door, which she now held open, bowing with a naïve grace in answer to the curate’s salutation.

“My mother wished me to watch that you did not go down without seeing her to-day,”

said Lucy apologetically; for Mrs. Hardon was far from well that week, and, since the long discussion that morning between old Matt and Septimus, she had been bemoaning her lot in a weak spiritless way, till, finding all his attempts at consolation of none effect, Septimus had taken his hat and gone out for a walk with his boy. To-day Mrs. Septimus would be tolerably well; to-morrow, in a weak fit, exacting sympathy from husband and child in a way that would have wearied less loving natures. Now she would refuse food, upon the plea that it could not be afforded for her; consolation, because she was a wretched, miserable burden; and medicine, because she was sure that it would do her no good.

“Be patient with her, my darling,” Septimus would say to Lucy—a needless request. “Think of the troubles she has gone through, and then look at me.”

“What for?” Lucy would cry, laughingly imprisoning him by seizing his scrubby bits of whisker in her little fingers, and then kissing

him on either cheek,—“what for? To see the dearest father that ever lived?” And then memories of the past would float through Septimus Hardon’s brain as he smoothed down the soft braided hair about the girl’s white forehead. But there were tearful eyes above the smiling lips, and Septimus Hardon’s voice used to tremble a little as he said, “God bless you, my darling!”

“Our beauty, some of us,” seemed vibrating in the curate’s ears as Lucy spoke; but the bright look of welcome, the maidenly reserve, and sweet air of innocence emanating from the fair girl before him, seemed to waft away the words, and, returning to the present, he followed her to where Mrs. Hardon was lying down. Drawing a chair to the bedside, he seated himself, to listen patiently to the querulous complaints he had so often heard before—murmurings which often brought a hot flush to Lucy’s cheek as she listened, until reassured by the quiet smile of the curate—a look which told her how well he read her mother’s heart, and pitied her for the long

sufferings she had endured,—sickness and sorrow,—which had somewhat warped a fond and loving disposition.

Perhaps it was unmaidenly, perhaps wrong in the giver and taker, but, seated at her sewing-machine in the next room, Lucy would watch through the open door for these looks, and treasure them up, never pausing to think that they might be the pioneers of a deeper understanding. She looked forward to his visits, and yet dreaded them, trembling when she heard his foot upon the stairs; and more than once she had timed her journeys to the warehouse so that they might take her away when he was likely to call; while often and often afterwards, long tearful hours of misery would be spent as she thought of the gap between them, and bent hopelessly over her sewing-machine.

A long interview was Mr. Sterne's this day, for Mrs. Hardon was more than ordinarily miserable, and had informed him two or three times over that she was about to take to her bed for good.

“But it does not matter, sir; it’s only for a little while, and then perhaps I shall be taken altogether. I’m of no use here, only to be a burden to that poor girl and my husband. But for me and the different fancies I have, that poor child need not be always working her fingers to the bone. But she will grow tired of it, and Mr. Hardon’s health will fail, and our bit of furniture will be seized; and I’m sure I’d rather die at once than that we should all be in the workhouse.”

“But,” said Mr. Sterne, smiling, “don’t you think matters might just as likely take the other direction? See now if it does not come a brighter day to-morrow, with a little mental sunshine in return for resignation;” and he whispered the last few words.

Now there was some truth in what Mrs. Septimus Hardon said; for had it not been for her liking for strange luxuries when her sick fits were on, Lucy need not have worked so hard. At other times Mrs. Hardon was self-denying to an excess; but when in bed, probably from

the effort of complaining, her appetite increased to a terrible extent, and she found that she required sticks of larks roasted, fried soles, oysters, pickled salmon, or chicken, to keep her up, while port-wine was indispensable. But if she had preferred ortolans to larks, game and truffles to chicken and oysters, if the money could have been obtained she would have had them. And many a day Septimus and Lucy dined off bread-and-cheese, and many a night went supperless to bed, that the invalid's fancies might be gratified.

The conversation went on, and Lucy at her work more than once raised her eyes; but when her mother's complaints were like the last, she bent her head, and the tears she could not restrain fell hot and fast upon the material before her.

"What have I to hope for?" moaned Mrs. Hardon, taking refuge in tears herself when she saw how Lucy was moved. "What have I to hope for?"

"Hope itself, Mrs. Hardon," said the curate firmly. "You suffer from a diseased mind as well

as from your bodily ailment; and could you but come with me for once, only during a day's visiting, I think you would afterwards bow your head in thankfulness even for your lot in life, as compared with those of many you would see."

"Yes, yes, yes, I know," sobbed the poor woman; "but don't be angry with me. I know how weak and wicked I am to murmur, when they study me as they do; but when I am like this, this weary time comes on, I am never satisfied. Don't—don't be angry with me."

Mrs. Hardon's sobs became so violent that Lucy hurried to the bed and took the weary head upon her breast; when, drawing his chair nearer, the curate took the thin worn hand held out so deprecatingly to him.

"Hush!" he whispered; and as he breathed words of tender sympathy that should awaken her faith, the mother looked earnestly on the sad smile on the speaker's face, a smile that mother and daughter had before now tried to interpret, as it came like balm to the murmuring woman, while to her child it spoke volumes; and as her own

yearned, it seemed to see into the depths of their visitor's heart, where she read of patience, long-suffering, and crushed and beaten-down hopes.

All at once a heavy step was heard upon the stairs, and Lucy started from her mother's side as a loud rough noise called "Mrs. Hardon! Mrs. Hardon!" But before she could reach the door of the other room, the handle rattled, and the curate could hear a man's step upon the floor.

"Hush!" exclaimed Mrs. Hardon, "it must be a letter;" and involuntarily, as he rose from his chair to leave, the curate had to stand and listen, gazing upon Lucy, who stood in the middle of the next room, now flooded with light from the sunshine which streamed through staircase window and open door, and he could not but mark the timid face of the girl as she stood wrapped as it were in the warm glow.

But it was no letter, only Mr. William Jarker, who, invisible from where the curate stood, was telling Lucy in familiar easy tones that his "mis-sus wanted to see the parson afore he went."

As Mr. Sterne stepped forward and saw the

ruffian's leering look and manner, and the familiar sneering smile upon his coarse lips, he shivered and turned paler than was his wont before knitting his brows angrily, while, troubled and confused, Lucy looked from one to the other as if expecting Mr. Sterne should speak.

But the look made no impression upon Mr. Jarker, who directed a half-laugh at Lucy, and then, nodding surlily towards the curate, he turned, and directly after there came the sounds of his heavy descending steps as he went down, leaving the room impregnated with the odour of the bad tobacco he had been smoking.

“ Our beauty, some of us,” rang in the curate's ears once more, and like a flash came the recollection of the meeting he had witnessed in the street. His mind was in a whirl with thoughts that he could not analyse ; while as his eyes met those of Lucy, the girl stood with face aflame, trembling before him—looks that might have meant indignation or shame, as, with the smile still upon his lip, but so altered, the curate turned to go ; but he stopped for a moment at the door, where out of

sight of Mrs. Hardon, he could again confront the shrinking girl with a long inquiring gaze ; but trembling, agitated, with lips void of utterance, though parted as if to speak, Lucy stood back, her eyes now cast down, and, when she raised them once again, he was gone.

Then, with the colour slowly fading, to leave her face ashy pale, Lucy stood with outstretched hands, gazing at the closed door. Something seemed rising in her throat which she tried to force back, and it was only by an effort that she kept from crying out, as, falling upon her knees by a chair, she buried her face in her hands, choking down the sobs, lest her mother should hear ; though she, poor woman, slowly turned her face to the wall, ignorant of her child's suffering, and slept.

And now again came ringing down the sweet clear trill of Jean's lark, till, worn out with the impetuosity of her grief, the poor girl raised her head, smoothed back her dark hair, and half-sitting, half-kneeling, listened to the strain.

The song ceased as suddenly as it had com-

menced, and the void was filled by a long, loud whistling ; when, with lips set firm, and angry countenance, Lucy rose and stepped lightly across the room to her sewing-machine by the open window, where, raising her eyes, she could see Mr. Jarker, pipe in hand, presenting himself once more as a half-length study, as he whistled and cheered on his flight of pigeons, which sailed round and round, till the whirring and flapping of their wings brought up early days of her childhood, and Lucy seemed to gaze upon some half-forgotten woodland scene in the country, with ring-necked stockdoves crowding on a bending branch after their return from flight.

But no such visions floated before the mind's eye of Mr. Jarker, for his pipe was out ; so, ceasing his whistle, he proceeded to ignite a match upon the blackened pipe-bowl, screening the tiny flame between his hands till the tobacco was in a glow—all the while in happy oblivion of a pair of indignant flashing eyes that rested upon him till their brightness was once more dimmed by tears. Heedless, too, was Mr. Jarker of the strange sar-

donic leer directed at him from the attic-window opposite his own, where *ma mère*, with her dim gray eyes, glanced at him from time to time as she busily knitted, or stabbed her ball of worsted ; for Mr. Jarker was evidently interested in what was taking place beneath him, as he glanced through his trap from time to time. And now once more, with rapid beat, rose the “click, click, click,” of Lucy’s sewing-machine, as, flashing in and out of the fine material the needle laid in its chain-like stitches ; but Lucy Grey’s finely-stitched lines were far from even that afternoon.

CHAPTER VII.

WITH MRS. JARKER.

ALWAYS at the call of the poor of his district, the Reverend Arthur Sterne sighed as, slowly descending towards the court, he tried to drive away the words that seemed to ring in his ears ; but in vain, for the next moment he was muttering them once more ; and the thought came upon him that, for many months past, he had been gazing at the Hardon family through a pleasant medium—a softening mist, glowing with bright colours, but now swept away by one rude blast, so that he looked upon this scene of life in all its rugged truthfulness. He told himself that the mist had once opened to afford him a glimpse, while again and again he smiled at the folly which had led him to expect romance in a

London court. The pleasant outlines and softened distance, toned down by the light mists, were gone now, and he gazed upon nothing but the cold, bare reality. It was strange ; but he did not ask himself whether the bitter blast might not have brought with it some murky, distorted cloud, whose shade had been cast athwart the picture upon which, he now woke to the fact, he had dearly loved to gaze ; and still muttering to himself, he slowly went down step by step.

“ So young, so pure-looking ! But who could wonder, living in this atmosphere of misery ? But what is it to me ? ” he cried angrily ; for strange thoughts and fancies came upon him, and his mind was whispering of a wild tale. The thoughts of the past, too, came—of the happy days when, in early manhood, he had loved one as fair and bright—one whom another bridegroom had claimed, as having been betrothed to him from her birth. The cold earth had been her nuptial-bed, and he, the lover, became the gloomy retired student until his appointment to a city curacy, and the devotion of his life to

the sorrows of the poor. But again he bit his lip angrily, at making the comparison between the dead and the living. What connection was there between them, and of what had he been dreaming? What indeed! After years upon years of floating down life's stream,—a calm and sad, but placid journey, unruffled but by the sorrows of others,—he now awoke to the fact that unwittingly he had halted by a pleasant spot, where he had been loitering and dreaming of something undefined—something fraught with memories of the past; and now he had been rudely awakened and recalled to the duties he had chosen.

He passed into the court, and stood for a few moments gazing at where there was a cellar opened, with half a score of children collected to drop themselves or their toys down; while, being a fresh arrival upon the scene, a cluster of the little ones began to get beneath his feet, and run against him, or give themselves that pleasant cramp known as “a crick in the neck,” by staring up in his face; but he freed himself

from his visitors by hastily entering the opposite house.

More than one door was opened, and more than one head thrust out, as Mr. Sterne ascended the staircase; but in every instance there was a smile and a rude curtsy to greet him, for he had that happy way of visiting learned by so few, and his visits always seemed welcome. Those who, moved by curiosity, appeared, were ladies, who directly after became exceedingly anxious concerning their personal appearance. Aprons, where they were worn, were carefully stroked down; hair was smoothed or made less rough; sundry modest ideas seemed to rise respecting a too great freedom of habit where a junior was partaking of nourishment; but everywhere the curate met with cordial glances, till he once more stood in front of an attic and entered.

Mr. Sterne had so far only encountered females; for "the master" of the several establishments was out at work, or down in the country after the birds, or at the corner of some street where there was a public-house, at

whose door he slouched, in the feeble anticipation that work would come there to find him, or that the landlord or a passing friend would invite him to have "a drain;" but Mr. William Jarker was, as has been seen, at home, though, with the exception of his legs, invisible; for he was among his pigeons, emulating the chimneys around by the rate at which he smoked — chimneys smoking here the year round, since in most cases one room formed the mansion of a family.

But Mr. Sterne had not come to see Jarker, but at the summons of his wife, in whom some eighteen months had wrought a terrible change. She sat wrapped in an old shawl, shivering beside the few cinders burning in the rusty grate — shivering though burned up with fever, the two or three large half-filled bottles of dispensary medicine telling of a long and weary illness. The wide windows admitted ample light, but only seemed to make more repulsive the poverty-stricken place, with its worn, rush-bottomed chairs, rickety table, upon which stood

the fragments of the last meal; the stump bedstead, with its patched patchwork counterpane; the heaped-up ashes beneath the grate; the battered and blackened quart-pot from the neighbouring public-house standing upon the hob to do duty as saucepan; while here and there stood in corners the stakes and nets used by Mr. Jarker in his profession of birdcatcher. A few cages of call-birds hung against the wall; but Mr. Jarker's custom was, when he had captured feathered prey, to dispose of it immediately—pigeons being his “fancy.”

A sad smile lit up the woman's face as the curate entered,—a face once doubtless pleasing, but now hollow, yellow, and ghastly; where hung out flauntingly were the bright colours which told of the enemy that held full sway in the citadel of life.

“I knew you would come, sir,” she whispered, letting her thin white fingers play amongst the golden curls of a little head, but half-concealed in her lap, where one bright round eye was peeping timidly out to watch the stranger;

and then, as the curate took one of the broken chairs and sat beside the sick woman, whenever she spoke it was in a whisper, and with many a timid glance at the ladder and open trap in the roof, where her master stood, as though she feared to call down punishment upon her head,—
“I knew you would come; and Bill was easy to-day, and come and fetched you, though he came back and said you were busy, and would not stop.”

“Look alive, there, and get that over!” cried Mr. Jarker from the trap. “I ain’t a-goin’ to stand here all day;” and by way of giving effect, or for emphasis, this remark was accompanied by a kick at the ladder, and a shake of the trap. Then followed an interval of peace, during which the presence of the domestic tyrant was made known only by the fumes of his tobacco, which floated down into the room, and made the poor woman cough terribly.

Once Mr. Sterne was about to tell the fellow to cease, but the look of horror in the woman’s face, and the supplicating joining of her hands,

made him pause, for he knew that he would be but adding to her suffering when his back was turned. The open trap seemed to act as a sort of retiring-room for Mr. Jarker when anyone was in the attic that he did not wish to see ; but every now and then during the earnest conversation with the suffering woman, there came a kick and a growl, and a shake of the ladder, which made Mr. Sterne frown, and the poor woman start as if in dread. And so, during the remainder of the curate's stay, the consolatory words he uttered were again and again interrupted ; while at last the voice came growling down as if in answer to a statement Mrs. Jarker had just made :

“ Don't you tell no lies, now, come, or I shall make it hot for yer ! ” When in the involuntary shudder the woman gave, there was plainly enough written for the curate's reading the long and cruel records of how “ hot ” for her it had often been made.

And now the importunities of the child by her knee aroused the poor woman to a forgetfulness of self in motherly cares, when the curate took

his leave, but in nowise hurried by the savage shake that Jarker gave to the ladder—a shake which brought down a few scraps of plaster, to fall upon the cages and make the songsters flutter timidly against their prison-bars.

Half-way down the stairs Mr. Sterne encountered the woman with whom he had seen Lucy in the Lane; the woman he presumed to be the mother of the child Mrs. Jarker had now for some time nursed.

For a moment he stopped, as if to speak; but he remembered the next instant that he had no right to question her, and he stood gazing sternly at her, while, as she shrank back into a corner of the landing, her look was keen and defiant—the look of the hunted at bay. Once he had followed her for some distance, and then perhaps he would have spoken; but now the desire seemed gone, and linked together in his mind were Lucy, *ma mère*, the ruffian he had left up-stairs, and this woman.

“But what is it to me?” he thought bitterly; and, hurrying down the stairs, he stood for a mo-

ment at the doorway, heedless of the children scampering over the broken pavement—heedless that, with hot eyes and fevered cheeks, Lucy had left her sewing-machine and stepped back from the window that she should neither see nor be seen—heedless of all around; for his thoughts were a strange medley—pride, duty, and passion seeking to lead him by different roads. Then for a while he remembered the poor woman he had left, whose leave-taking he felt was near—a parting that he could not but feel would be a happy release from sorrow and suffering.

At last, turning to go, he cast his eyes towards the open window that Lucy had so lately left, when, with knitted brow and care gnawing at his heart, he passed out into the street, and walked towards his lodgings; but even there, in the midst of the busy throng, where the deafening hum of the traffic of the great city was ever rising and falling, now swelling into a roar, and again sinking to the hurried buzz of the busy workers, ever rang in his ears the bitter words of the old Frenchwoman—“Our beauty, some of us !”

CHAPTER VIII.

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE.

“Now, sir,” said old Matt, as he appeared, brushed-up and smart for the occasion, punctual to his appointment; “now, sir; here we are—baptism, marriage, and doctor. First ought to come last, you know, only St. Mark’s Church comes before Finsbury, don’t you see?”

Septimus Hardon rose from his writing with a sigh, for he was far from sanguine of success, and would fain even now have given up his task entirely, so feeble seemed to him the likelihood of any advantage accruing; but in obedience to instructions from Mrs. Septimus, old Matt rattled on about the future, thoroughly doing his duty in keeping the shrinking man to his part; and so they started.

They made their way out into Holborn, and then up Skinner-street, past the frowning walls of Newgate, and into the street of the same name ; when old Matt could not get along for stopping to admire the various joints displayed, and giving his opinion upon their merits.

“Here, let’s go this way, sir,” he said, turning into Warwick-lane. “Pretty game this, sir, isn’t it? Slaughtered sheep, and murdered novels, and books of all sorts close together. Authors’ sheep’s-heads, and butchers’ sheep’s-heads cheek by jowl. Rum thing for both trades to get so close together. Regular bit of philosophy if you like to take it up, sir ; stomach and brains, you see, food for both—books for the brains, meat for the stomach ; and then backwards and forwards, one feeds the other, and one couldn’t get on without the other ; and here they are situated close to the very heart of the City. Look at the circulation going on—wonderful, ain’t it, sir ?”

Old Matt stopped by a slaughter-house, not to pity the simple animal just killed, but to point out sundry choice portions that might be had bar-

gains, if they could have availed themselves of the opportunity.

“Wouldn’t do, though, to go about such a job as we have on hand carrying a sheep’s-head, would it, sir?” he observed to Septimus.

“No; pray come along, and let’s get our task over,” exclaimed the latter.

“To be sure,” said Matt, coming to himself, and the next minute they were in Paternoster-row. “Lots of my old friends here,” said Matt, stopping short in the middle of the narrow way, to be hustled by boys laden with sheets of paper fresh from the press, lads carrying reams, or newly-bound works tied between boards; men with blue bags over their shoulders heavily laden with books; men with oblong “mems” in their hands which they consulted as they hurried from swinging door to swinging door, collecting the publications of the different firms. Once the old man was nearly run over by a truck full of type-galleys driven by a pair of reckless imps of some neighbouring printing-office; while at least four times he came into contact with the fruit-baskets of the nymphs

in stout boots and flattened bonnets, whose haunt is the labyrinth of learning known as "the Row."—"Lots of my old friends here," said Matt as his companion looked bewildered, and was thrust off the pavement; on to it again; into booksellers' where he did not want to go; and once against the muddy wheel of a cab, whose driver roundly abused him for nearly getting himself injured.—"Lots of my old friends here. Ah, you needn't mind a bit of pushing, sir—it's a busy place. Now, you know, if I liked to hunt about, I could find more than one bit of my work here, for I've done things and bits of things that's come out in more than half these places. All sorts of stuff; and what a sight of work a man can be put upon in a matter of fifty year, from playbills to prayer-books, and down again to penny-a-lining and posters! Law and physic's been my strongest points: but there; I've been on your magazines, and newspapers, and three-volume novels, and pamphlets, and everything else that's printed on a leaf, 'cept last dying-speeches and halfpenny songs; and I never did get down quite so low as

that. I've taken hold of author's copy so queer that it's made you scratch your head and turn the paper t'other way up to see which is tops and which is bottoms, and then back again, for you've been as wise as ever. Talk about ants and bluebottles running over the paper with inky feet, that's nothing, sir. You've seen them painter-chaps, sir, graining the shetters of shops?"

Septimus, seeing that he was expected to say something, roused himself from his brown study, and nodded.

"Well," continued Matt, "you see they have what they call a tool, though it's only a flat brush made like a comb, and with that they make lines cross and across the panels, all about the same distance apart, and then they dab them lightly with a long soft brush to keep the grain from looking too stiff and hard. Well, I've had copy that's looked as if the author had used one of these tools dipped in ink, and streaked it across and across the paper, and then dabbed it, not with a very soft brush, but with a very hard one, shoving in, too, a few smears and blots, just to

fill up as knots and specimens of cross-grain. Up one goes to the overseer and asks him to help you, giving the other men a side-grin at the same time. He takes it, looks at it, turns it over, and then can't make anything of it, though he won't say so; for overseers must of course seem to know everything. So he sticks it back in your hand, and says he, 'Go and make the best you can of it; for I'm busy.' Well, you go back, and make the best you can of it; puzzles out one word, jumps at another, puts in two, and guesses two more, while you make a couple more out of the next line fit in somewhere after 'em; and so, one way or another, it gets scrambled up, and the proof goes to the reader, who cuffs his boy's head because he blunders so over the stuff he can't make head nor tail of, though he's as much bothered as his boy; while, though some of them are clever, intelligent fellows, some of those readers, sir, have about as much imagination as a mop. They're down upon a wrong letter, or bad pointing or spelling, and stick a big *qy.*? against a bit of slack grammar, like lightning; but give 'em a take of stuff where

the author goes a little out of the regular rut, and it bothers them as much as the bit of copy I'm talking about. Well, sir, corrections get made, and the proof is sent in to the author, who most likely don't know it again; but he sends it back so as one has a better chance of getting it together; and so it goes on, backwards and forwards, till it's all right, and they write 'press' in one corner, when it's printed, and, as far as we're concerned, there's an end of it. Strange ways, ain't they, sir?"

Septimus Hardon stared in a bewildered manner at the speaker, but did not answer.

"Blest if I think he's heard a word I've said," muttered the old fellow.

"Strange?" said Septimus, rousing himself; "yes, very."

"'Tis, sir," said Matt, who was interested in his subject. "Now, do you know, sir," he continued after they had walked part of the way along the Row,—“do you know that if I was younger, I should be for founding a society, to be called the ‘Printers’ Spectacle Association,’ supported by

contributions from writers for the press, who by this means would supply us with glasses, for often and often they quite destroy our sight."

Old Matt's dissertation was put an end to by the driver of one of the Delivery carts, when, returning to the matter which had brought them from home, the strange couple were soon threading their way along Cheapside.

There was but little difficulty in getting access to the registers of the old church, and a not very long search brought the seekers to the entry, in brown ink upon yellow paper, of the baptism of Septimus, son of Octavius and Lavinia Hardon, January 17—; but though the ages of the children before and after were entered, by some omission, his was absent.

A copy was taken by both, and then they stood once more in the open street.

"Just as I told you, sir," said Matt, "isn't it? there's the date; but it don't say how old you were."

"No," replied Septimus; "but still it is satisfactory, so far. Now we'll see about the marriage, and then visit Finsbury."

“ You know the church ?” said Matt.

“ Well, not exactly,” said Septimus dreamily.

“ There are two in the street ; but it was at one of them.”

“ Good,” said the old man ; and soon after they stood in the street of two churches, and, taking the most imposing, they obtained admission to the vestry, where, after a long and careful search of the time-stained register, they were compelled to give up, for there was no result ; while the regular way in which the leaves followed proved that none were missing.

“ Try t’other,” said Matt laconically ; and soon after they entered the damp, mouldy-smelling receptacle of the registers at the second church—a quaint, queerly-built place that looked as if architecture had been set at defiance when it was erected.

Old Matt was quiet and laconic enough in his speech ; but as leaf after leaf was turned over, it was evident that the old man was more deeply interested than Septimus himself ; for he grew so excited, that he was quite voracious

with his snuff, his nose becoming a very devouring dragon of Scotch and rappee, till the supposed date of the marriage was neared, when the snuff was hastily pocketed.

“Rayther rheumatic spot this, I should think,” said Matt to the sexton, so as to appear quite at his ease.

“Well, yes, it *is* damp,” said the sexton, who would have had no difficulty in passing himself off as Matt’s brother; “but we have a fire here on Sundays all through the winter.”

“Don’t have many berrin’s now, I s’pose,” said Matt, again bringing out the snuff, but this time for hospitable purposes.

“Bless you, no,” said the sexton, “ain’t had one for years upon years. All cemetery work now.”

“To be sure, of course,” said Matt, trying to converse in a cool pleasant way, but with one eye fixed upon the trembling searcher; for some of Matt’s eagerness seemed now to be transferred to his companion.

“There’s a great piece of the book out here,”

said Septimus suddenly—"most of the year before the baptism."

"Torn out, by Jove!" muttered Matt, shaking his head, and looking suspicion's self.

"Dessay there is, sir," said the sexton coolly; "the damp here would spile the binding of any book."

"But, I say; look here, you sir; here's a good four months gone: no Jennywerry, nor Feberwerry, nor March, nor April. Looks precious queer," said Matt.

"Ah, so there is—good big bit gone; all but a leaf here and there." And then, to get a better look, the sexton took out an old leathern case, drew out his spectacles, replaced the case very carefully, wiped the glasses upon the tail of his coat, and then very leisurely put them on, a process not directly completed; for, like their master, the springs of the spectacles had grown weak, and were joined by a piece of black tape, which had to be passed carefully over the sexton's head to keep the glasses in their place. "Ah," he said again, while the searchers looked on,

astonished at his coolness, "so there is—a good big bit gone; but 'tain't no wonder, for the thread's as rotten as tinder, and—"

"I say, old un, don't tear any more out," cried Matt excitedly; for the sexton was experimentally disposed, and testing the endurance of the thread and glue.

"There's plenty loose," said the old sexton, "and I shouldn't be a bit surprised if you find a lot more gone."

Septimus Hardon looked at Matt, who returned the look, for the feeling of suspicion was now fully shared. However, they still went on carefully searching.

"It's of no use," said Septimus at last, mournfully; "we may as well go. I never had any hope."

"Don't be in a hurry, sir," said Matt. "You know there are other ways of killing the cat, as the old saying says; wait a bit. Looks suspicious, certainly," he said, treating himself to a fresh pinch of snuff.—"I say, guv'nor, you haven't got the loose leaves lying about anywheres, have

you? Not been taken away that you know of, eh?"

The sexton shook his head, thrust his hands to the bottoms of his trousers-pockets, shrugged his shoulders to his ears, and then stood gazing at his visitors with his spectacles high up on his forehead.

"No," said he, "nobody never meddles with 'em, 'cept a lawyer's clerk now and then; and they're very civil, and just copies out something, and gives me a shilling, and then goes."

Septimus Hardon took the hint in its first acceptance, while the mouldy old sexton removed one hand from his pocket to accept the proffered shilling held to him, before his visitors were about to take the second part of the hint.

As they moved off through the damp old church, Septimus Hardon wondered whether, upon some bright morning half a century before, his father and mother had knelt before that altar and been made one. He sighed as he walked on, meeting in the entrance a tall,

gentlemanly-looking man who was passing in.

“What’s to be done next, Matt?” said Septimus, in a dispirited tone.

“Pint of porter and crust o’ bread-and-cheese,” said the old man decidedly. “I’m faint, sir—got a fit of my chronics; but it’s taking me the wrong way to-day; I’m hungry, and you must want support. Keep your chin in the air, sir; we can’t win every time. You’ve had two tries this morning, and one’s come all right. That register looks suspicious, certainly; but after all you can’t even go and swear that your old people were married in that church; and even if you could, and had the copy of the stiffikit, that ain’t all we want, for it don’t prove that you weren’t a year old then.”

“Hi!” cried a voice behind them; and upon the cry being repeated, they both turned to find that the old sexton was telegraphing them to come back, by wagging his head in the direction of the church-door.

“What’s up now?” said old Matt when they reached him.

“Parson wants to see you in the westry,” was the reply.

Anxiously following the old man, Septimus Hardon found himself in the presence of the gentleman he had encountered at the door.

“I think,” said he, “that you have been complaining of the bad state of our registers, and really we deserve it. I have only been here a few weeks, and have done but little towards getting them right. However, I have quite fifty loose leaves and pieces arranged here ready for pasting back, though I can assure you it is no light task.”

As he spoke, he took down from a little closet on the wall a heap of damp-stained, ragged, worthless-looking paper, and then set himself to try and help discover the required name.

“Hardon,” he said,—“Hardon, Octavius Hardon and Lavinia Addison. We’ll lay those that are done with down here, if you please; for, though they do not appear so, the leaves are in a certain

order. Hardon, Hardon, Octavius, and Lavinia Addison," he kept on muttering, as Septimus and he carefully examined column after column amongst the dilapidated leaves; though Septimus progressed but slowly, for his hand trembled and a mist swam before his eyes.

"Take a glass of wine," said the curate kindly, producing a decanter and glass from the little cupboard; "you seem agitated."

Septimus took the glass with trembling hand, and then resumed his task with increased energy, till at last there were not above half a dozen leaves to scan, when he uttered an exclamation of joy, for there, upon a scrap before him—torn, stained, and almost illegible—was the sought-for entry, bearing the well-known signature of his father, and the trembling handwriting of his mother.

"Here, here, Matt," he whispered, "look!" and the paper quivered in his hands—"Octavius Hardon, Lavinia Addison,' and signed by her old friend Miss Morris."

"Right it is, so far," said Matt, holding his glasses to his eyes wrong way foremost, with both

hands, "and just a year and a half before the baptism. Now you know, sir, I pitched it pretty strong before now, so as you shouldn't expect too much ; but it's my belief that, after all said and done, we've got enough documentary evidence ; and things seeming so very regular, if you had begun as you should have done, unless there was something very strong on the other side that we can't see through, you must have got a verdict. But then I hardly like for you to try on this only ; for the law's a ticklish thing to deal with, and though this all looks so straightforward, it don't prove against what your uncle says, and will bring witnesses to swear."

"But how can he ?" exclaimed Septimus, in a whisper.

"Ah," said Matt, refreshing himself after his wont, "how can he ? Why, by means of that comical stuff as he's been so anxious to get hold of. Why, sir, he could find witnesses as would swear to any mortal thing on the face of this earth ; they'd almost undertake to prove as you weren't born at all, sir. Mind, I don't say that

they'd carry the day, sir ; but I'm only telling you of what villany there is in this world, and how you must be prepared, even to fighting the dev— I beg your pardon, sir," said Matt bashfully, as he pulled up short, having in his earnestness forgotten the presence of the third party.

"I'm sorry to say that there's a great deal of truth in what you assert," said the curate quietly ; for Septimus was looking at him in an appealing way as if expecting that he would demolish all that Matt had advanced. "Suborned witnesses are nothing new in this world of ours."

"Pull out your note-book, sir, and let's take it down," said Matt ; and as he spoke, he drew out an old dog's-eared memorandum-book and a stumpy fragment of lead pencil that would not mark without being kissed and coaxed every moment, when he copied the entry most carefully, compared it with the original, and then with that just made by Septimus Hardon.

"Really," said the clergyman at parting, "I am extremely glad to have met you this morning,

and you may depend upon finding us in better order at your next visit."

"There has been no trickery there you see, Matt," said Septimus, as they stood once more in the street; "all seems straightforward."

"Just so, sir; your uncle seems to have some game of his own that I can't quite see through as yet; but stop a bit. Good sort o' chap that young parson. I'll ask him to dinner some day, though he didn't say, 'Take a glass of sherry, Matthew Space.' Then how careful you ought to be! Now I should have been ready to swear that your precious uncle had been at them books. S'pose he ain't so much older than you, sir?"

"Not many years," replied Septimus. "He was my poor father's younger brother. But now for the doctor!" he said in an elated tone.

"Thanky, sir, but suppose we have the porter and bread-and-cheese first. You youngsters are so rash and impatient; and besides, I didn't taste that fine old dry sherry, you know. One thing at a time's the best plan, and it seems to me that a little refreshment's the next thing wanted. 'Tain't

no use to suppose, sir, that because a horse has won one race he'll go and polish off the next the same hour. D'yer see, sir?"

Septimus expressed himself as being able to see, and he submitted forthwith to his companion's guidance.

Now most people would imagine that Matt entered the first inviting open portal that presented itself, where the gorgeously-emblazoned boards announced the retailing of So-and-so's entire; but no. Old Matt seemed very particular and hard to please, passing house after house before he could meet with one to his satisfaction; and in a quarter of an hour's brisk walk a few public-houses can be passed in London streets. But Matt had something else on his mind besides draught stout; and at last, when Septimus Hardon's patience was well-nigh exhausted, the old man stopped short before a place where the window displayed a notice to the effect that the Post-office Directory was at the bar.

"There," said Matt, pointing to the window, "thought me a nuisance now, didn't you, sir?"

But that's what I wanted. So now we'll have our stout and cheese, and a look at the doctors too."

Seated in the public-house parlour, fragrant with the fumes of flat beer and stale tobacco, they were soon discussing the foaming stout and more solid refreshments, though Septimus spent the greater part of his time poring over the volume he had laid open upon the gum-ringed table—a volume that Matt considered would be as useful as a medical directory. Surgeons there were in plenty; but only one answering to the name of Phillips, and he was practising at Newington.

"Moved there, perhaps," said Matt.

Septimus Hardon shook his head, and read again, "Phillips, E. J., Terrace, Newington."

"Stop a bit, sir," said Matt, rising and catching the ring hung from the ceiling, and pulling the bell.—"Here, fill that pint again, my man; and, I say, got another of these d'rectories anywheres?"

"Yes," said the pot-boy, "there's another somewheres—an old un."

"That's the ticket, my lad, bring it in."

The boy performed the, to him, satisfactory feat of pitching the pot in the air, and catching it with one hand as he went out, though the performance was somewhat marred by the vessel turning in its flight, and announcing its descent by a small frothy brown shower, which sprinkled the performer's countenance. However, he was soon back with the refilled measure, and a very dirty, very dusty, and dog's-eared old copy of the Directory, with one cover torn off, and a general aspect of its having been used for generations as the original London Spelling-book.

Septimus seized the bulky tome, and soon had the right page found; and in this volume there was no mention of E. J. Phillips of Newington.

"Young beginner," said Matt hollowly; for he had the pewter-vessel to his lips. "Anyone else same name?"

"Two more!" cried Septimus in a husky voice: "Phillips, Thomas, Camden-town; Phillips, Nicholas, Chiswell-street."

“Hooray!” cried Matt, thumping down the pewter-pot, so that a portion of the contents splashed over into the cheese-dish. “That’s the man we want, sir; so finish your crust and cheese, and then off we go.” And shrewd old Matt forgot to ask himself in his excitement how it was that the name was not in the Directory of ten years later date, but acted up to what he was advising, and, then late in the afternoon, they again started on their search.

It was not a very long walk from Walbrook to Chiswell-street; but old Matt made very little progress, halting at times as if in pain, while in answer to inquiries he only smiled and declared that it was his “chronics.” Now he panted and seemed out of breath, then he paused at one of his favourite halting-places, but too short of breath to make a speech, even had he felt so disposed. At the last stoppage, induced by Septimus Hardon’s eager strides, the old man panted out :

“Let’s see, sir; you walked down to Some-sham, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” replied Septimus somewhat surprised at the question. “Come along;” for he was now as eager to continue the quest as he had formerly been to avoid it.

“That’s all very well,” said Matt, panting; “but I shouldn’t have liked to walk with you, and if Chiswell-street had been t’other side the square, you’d have had to carry me, so I tell you; and—”

“Is anything wrong?” exclaimed Septimus anxiously, for his companion had turned very pale and haggard.

“Not much,” he gasped; “better d’rectly—out of breath rather.”

But he seemed to grow so much worse, that all thought of farther search was forgotten in the anxiety to get the old man to the principal thoroughfare, for he stoutly refused to hear of a cab being called; though he sank back thoroughly exhausted in a corner of the omnibus, when at last the right one passed with room inside.

A quiet cup of tea and an hour’s rest seemed

to restore the old man, and he rose to leave Bennett's-rents, firmly refusing to allow Septimus to walk home with him, though it was only by slow stages and great exertion that he reached his lodging.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CURATE AT HOME.

THE task of the Reverend Arthur Sterne was weary, and one that might have made him sigh had he known no other troubles. Work, work, work, of the most disheartening character for the most part; and it was only in rare instances that he could feel in his own heart that his labours had been of any avail. Here he would listen to a hypocritical tale of woe, there to a story of real sorrow; now his task would be to try and point out some foolish reckless piece of extravagance; then to call to account for folly and idleness. Everywhere there was the same display of live to-day, and let to-morrow take care of itself. Forethought and providence seemed to know no

home in Bennett's-rents and the neighbourhood, perhaps because hope had often been so long deferred that the sickened hearts believed in it no more. Dirt everywhere, drunkenness frequently, vice often, with their followings of sorrow, repentance, disease, and death. Years, however, had made him to be looked upon as a friend, and his step was always welcomed, while, effecting what good he could, he toiled patiently on; fearing no fever, dreading no epidemic, but ever ready, he visited the bedside of the stricken—the vilest or the most unfortunate—ready to join his prayers to theirs for pardon—to point out the long neglected road that should have been taken—to teach the ignorant the words they had never known, or perhaps forgotten years upon years before. His was a task that knew but little earthly recompense, save the knowledge of duty done; but many a parting soul blessed him with lips soon to be motionless for ever, or thanked him with those glazing eyes from which the wild despairing look had faded, as he knelt in intercession for one whose opportunity for better things had never

come, but who, born into the misery and wretchedness of a great town, had passed in it the life now about to be given up at the stern call that knows no refusal.

It was a weary task amidst so poor and wretched a flock; but could the curate have been at rest, he would have been happy in the good he effected, and the simple confidence now placed in him by those he visited. Even Bill Jarker had of late taken to pulling off his fur-cap and picking it when they met; and there was no hypocrisy in the salutation, for it was wrung from him by the genuine respect he felt. But then the curate was not at rest, for he had now thoroughly awakened to the germs which had rooted themselves in his heart, growing more and more till his very life was interlaced with the strong fibres. Now, he would deliberately try to eradicate the growth, tearing and lacerating himself in his efforts to rid himself of the unbidden guest; but the progress he made was slow in comparison with the growth he fought against. Blindly, though, he would tell himself that he

had conquered, that the last root was torn out, and the door of his heart closed against further entrance. And then, in the pride of his believed victory, he would tell himself of how he had been about to lavish riches upon one beneath him, and unworthy, when his heart would reply that love was a leveller, and laugh to scorn the subtle distinctions of caste; reminding him, too, that this maiden had grown up as it were beneath his eye, that he had watched her for years, while she was as well born, perhaps, as he. And then, in his heart, there would shoot forth a tiny green blade, then there was the opening leaf, and soon again the blossom; while roots spread here and there lacing and interlacing stronger and stronger than ever, as if he had been by his efforts merely preparing the soil for a richer growth of the ever-verdant clinging plant that he sought in vain to tear away.

So wearily on, day after day, passed the curate's life, a struggle between the natural affection and self-imposed duty, while night after night in his sleepless hours he heaped up re-

proaches upon himself for work neglected, and the dreamy musings into which he was wont to fall. Self-deceiving, he had gone on taking more and more interest in the Hardon family, blinding himself to his real sentiments, until now that the veil had been so rudely snatched from his eyes he writhed hourly, maddened almost, that he should have allowed his peace to have been disturbed for what he fiercely told himself was worthless.

It was not a long walk from the Bennett's-rents region to Surrey-street, where he had rooms in a gloomy wilderness of a house, which he shared with a solicitor, an accountant, and a company that seemed to be composed of a small secretary and a large heap of prospectuses. Here he would seek for the rest he could not find, anxious and worn, day after day, since his last visit to the Hardons, much to the discomposure of Aunt Fanny, who dwelt with him in the double capacity of housekeeper and companion.

A prim, pleasant old dame, proud of her great age, and of her bright silver hair, smoothed in

bands beneath her quaint old widow's cap ; sitting or standing, ever with her arms crossed over her black corded-silk apron, while a mitten-covered hand clasped each elbow. A prim, pleasant-looking old dame, always dressed in lavender poplin, whose stiff plaits seemed to have been carved out of the solid, as she stood at the window watching for the coming of her boy. For "Arty" always had been, and doubtless always would be, a boy in her pleasant old eyes—eyes that spoke the truth of her tender old heart ; though there was one point upon which Aunt Fanny would err, and that was her age. Unlike ladies of a certain time of life, she was proud of her years, and, doubtless from some haziness in her arithmetic, she was given to adding to them, so that more than once in her arguments respecting points of time, she somewhat upset her calculations.

"Why, aunt," the curate would say, "you cannot be so old as you say by eight years."

"Nonsense, my dear boy, how can you know anything about it ? I'm eighty-two."

“Then,” he would say loudly, “you must have been thirty when you were married.”

“Nonsense, child; how can you be so silly! And you need not shout so. I was twenty-two when your poor uncle led me to the altar.” And then she would fall to smoothing her black apron, and arranging the folds of her dress, with hands that trembled in an agitated manner, a tear standing in one of the still bright eyes, as the old recollections sprang up, when, ceasing the discussion, her nephew would tenderly kiss her hand, and sit affectionately gazing in her handsome old face. Indeed time had paid a certain respect to Aunt Fanny, so that she looked years younger than she really was, while all her faculties save one were bright as ever; for proud though she was of the fine stitching placed with her own needle round Arty’s shirt-fronts—stitching aided by no spectacles—and ignorant though she was of her failing, yet Aunt Fanny was terribly deaf.

But she hardly felt the affliction, speaking of it as a slight weakness which affected her when

she had a cold, always remaining unconscious that what she looked upon as a whisper was a conversation carried on in a loud key. Poor Aunt Fanny could not hear very well from her pew in the gallery, right in front of the organ, for the thing would make, she said, such a terrible buzzing sound; so a seat was provided for her just beneath the pulpit, which she found necessary, for clergymen were not what they used to be. On the following Sunday, her nephew had ascended to his place, spread out the black-velvet case she had made for his sermons, prayed, and given out his text twice, when, before the first words of the sermon were uttered, Aunt Fanny began to mutter to herself, though her muttering was so loud that everyone present in the little church must have heard it, her nephew himself being overwhelmed with confusion.

“Dear, dear, dear!” she exclaimed; “it’s of no use, and I can’t hear a bit. I might just as well have stayed where I was. O Arty, Arty, you sad boy, why will you mumble so?”

Arty did not mumble any more that evening,

but dashed headlong into his discourse ; so that when they returned, Aunt Fanny thought she rather liked the new seat the better of the two. Still it was of no avail ; the old lady could never hear well in that church ; for rector and curate had both got into a bad habit of speaking in a low tone, and drawling out their words. But Aunt Fanny's pity was sublime in the case of a friend also troubled with deafness ; though he knew it, and did not scruple to make an ear-trumpet of his hand, though this was needless when Aunt Fanny was the speaker ; for her sentences were always perfectly audible. " Poor Edwards !" she would say, as she smoothed down her apron, " what a nice man you would be if you weren't so deaf ! It's a pity—a great pity !" And then she would sigh, in profound ignorance that " poor Edwards's " confusion was caused by her habit of thinking aloud.

And this was the companion of Arthur Sterne's solitude ; but there were pleasant smiles to welcome him, and beneath their sunny rays the deeply-cut lines that seamed his forehead grew

less marked, while the light of the pleasant old sunny face was reflected in his own.

Aunt Fanny had seen the change that had come over her nephew, and waited patiently for his complaints, which came not ; and after many days, unable to contain her anxiety, she crossed to where the curate was sitting, and, taking his hand, frowned severely as she felt his pulse.

“ Well, aunty, and how is it ? ” he said, smiling at the earnest countenance beside his.

But Aunt Fanny was too much occupied with her thoughts to speak, and only nodded, and then shook her head, as, in her own mind, she went over her long catalogue of simples suited to the various ills of human life, till at last she settled upon camomile-tea as being the most efficacious remedy for her nephew’s complaint, which she settled to be disorder of the liver, produced from over-work, and not a word would she hear to the contrary.

“ Now, don’t shout, my dear ; I’m not deaf. You know you do too much ; and if you won’t petition the bishop for a change, I shall. What

do you say to a pleasant curacy in some pretty country place?"

Nothing. What could he say, when he had wakened to the fact that, in spite of pride and doubts, that court was all the world to him?

Appeal was useless; so, yielding with as good a grace as he could, the curate suffered himself to be doctored for his complaint, turning to his books for rest at every reprieve. If it had not been for the heat of the next few days, he would not have been allowed to stir out without the thick muffler that had been aired for his throat; while the many appellants who visited the lodging of a morning were answered by Aunt Fanny herself; for many came to ask advice and comfort of the curate, more especially from amongst the poor Irish; but though they came ostensibly for spiritual, they generally managed to explain that a little solid help would be most acceptable.

Till now, living in their quiet, simple way, the relations between them being more like those existent with mother and son, Arthur Sterne had had no secret from the dame; but now, when he

would gladly have eased his burdened heart by confidence, he shrank from laying bare its secrets, even though he was in that state when men are most prone to be confidential. But there was to him something repugnant in the idea of shouting words that seemed to demand that they should be whispered in the twilight of some calm eve, when the reassuring pressure of that time-marked hand would have been loving and tender. For she had been to him as a mother, taking that duty on herself when he had been left an orphan, and now there seemed ingratitude in keeping back any of the troubles of his life. He had no doubts respecting Aunt Fanny. Did he but bring there a wife, and say, "I love this woman," she would take her to her heart and believe in her; for, saving the mumbling in his speech, Arthur Sterne could not, in her eyes, do wrong. Still the secret was kept—feverishly kept—and brooded over in the sleepless nights, or in those dark watches, when, impatiently quitting the pillow that brought no rest, he walked the streets of the sleeping city, alone, or in company with

some policeman ; when mostly his steps would lead him to the end of the court, where, in Septimus Hardon's window, generally glimmered a feeble light—one whose purposé he often asked himself.

At times he would determine to flee the place, and in some far-off country retreat try again to root out the love that had taken hold on him ; for here he felt that he could not reason with himself. In vain he conjured up visions of a calm, pale face, whose marble cheek he had once kissed, an hour before it was laid in the grave ; in vain he told himself that he was faithless to that old love, and failing in his duty. There still was the sweet, gentle face of Lucy Grey haunting him ever ; and though he recalled the words of the old Frenchwoman, and her sinister meaning—the meeting in the Lane, and, above all, the look of shame and confusion—there was the same sense of love beating down all else. But he had made a resolve at last ; and that was, to see and question the woman he had seen in Lucy's company ; he would see her, and then seek for rest somewhere,

since the idol he had unconsciously set up was sullied and broken.

Twice over he had met this woman, but now his efforts to see her seemed in vain. He called at the Jarkers' again and again ; but, in place of her coming, as Mrs. Jarker said, to see her child and leave the weekly payment for its support, week after week, as if she knew that she was watched, she came not, but sent money-orders by post. He shrank from speaking to Mrs. Jarker concerning her connection with Lucy ; while Lucy herself he had not seen. Watching seemed useless, for the woman came not ; and at last, almost in despair, he had determined to undertake that which his heart shrank from—the questioning of Lucy herself.

At last, after a long and busy day, as now had become his wont, he wandered through the streets for hours, apparently feeling no fatigue, till, late in the night, he stopped by the Rents, walked slowly up the deserted court, lit by its solitary flickering lamp, whose broken glass made the flame dance and tremble, while when an

extra puff of wind passed down the court it was all but extinct. There was the faint light, though, in one of the rooms occupied by the Hardons, and after standing watching it for some time he hurried away, calling himself foolish, romantic, boy, madman. It was but a passing fancy, he told himself, such a one as might have moved him in his youth; but his heart would not harbour the belief, and mockingly cast it forth.

He was angry and half-maddened to feel how helpless he was, and what a sway the impulse now moving him had obtained; to think that he—the minister of religion, the teacher of others—should have so little power over self that he should be swayed here and driven there helplessly; the whole current of his quiet life turned from its course, and that too in spite of the way in which he had battled, while the doubts that assailed him only added to his misery.

Now as he hurried on he would meet some policeman, who turned to watch him; now it would be some drunken reveller, or a wretched homeless being just started from some corner where he had

been sleeping, and compelled to wander the streets till daybreak; but ever and again he would encounter the flauntingly-dressed outcast humming the snatch of a popular air with a wretched attempt at gaiety, which lasted till she had passed, and then almost broke into a wail. But he managed that they should always meet face to face beneath some gas-lamp, when he would sigh and pass on, for not one that he met during his search was the woman of the Lane.

Mrs. Jarker did not know her name, nor yet where she lodged; but the little girl was to be called Agnes. That was all the information the curate could obtain; and at times he would frown, bite his lips, and give up the search, but only to take it up once again for what he always told himself was the last time. Then he would play the hypocrite, and tell himself that his motives were unselfish; that to marry a girl in Lucy's position of life would be folly — absurd: he was only anxious for her well-being and future life.

But these fits lasted only for a short time,

and then, smiling bitterly, he would, as upon this night, betake himself to the search once more.

And yet it was not on his account she came not to Bennett's-rents, for Agnes Hardon knew not of his quest; she had other reasons, though the visits to her child and Lucy were the only bright spots in her wretched life. Lucy heard from her from time to time through old Matt, who bore her notes always under protest, but still obediently, though Lucy was the only one who knew the poor creature's secret, and she dared not make it known to Septimus lest he should forbid their meetings; for, abandoned by all, hopeless, and in misery, Agnes Hardon clung to her connection with Lucy as the only hope left on earth for self and child. Her appeals to Some-sham remaining unanswered, she had ceased to send, and, removing from lodging to lodging, any attempt upon Mrs. Hardon's part to find her would have been vain. She had shrunk from the keen searching glances of the curate when they had met, seeing in everyone now an enemy

whose object was to break her intimacy with Lucy, whom she, therefore, saw only by stealth. Her heart bled for the misery of the family, for she learned all from time to time at their meetings; while, knowing full well that there was a will made, to which she had signed her name as witness, yet could she not declare her knowledge, from a shrewd suspicion that the doctor had made away with it, and she told herself that she had already brought sorrow and shame enough upon her home.

And to meet her, night by night stole Arthur Sterne through the streets, ever hating himself for his madness, ever resolving that each search should be the last, and still weakly yielding to the one great anxiety that troubled him. Now he would be seeing Lucy's candid face reproachfully gazing at him, and directly after would come again the bitter, spiteful countenance of the Frenchwoman, and he seemed to hear her words, "Our beauty, some of us;" and at such times all faith in the girl had gone. "Our beauty, some of us!" How the words seemed to ring in his

ears; they were borne to him in the echo of the far-off vehicle, chimed by the clocks; the very air seemed alive with the words, till he hurried on through street after street again to try and thoroughly wear himself out, that sleep might come, and with it rest from the mental anxiety and doubt he suffered.

At last he stood on one of the bridges, leaning against the parapet and gazing down at the hurrying river, feeling the soft sweet breeze of early dawn sweep up with the tide, whispering of the moaning sea and far-off reaches where the green reeds sighed and rustled, and the wide green marshes were spread out. There was a faint light coming in the east, and the stars were paling, as the gas grew sickly-hued and dim. All was still and peaceful, so that he could hear the lapping of the water far below as it seemed to whisper peace to his perturbed spirit, telling of the far-off sea and its mysteries, the hopes and fears there buried, and then of the many lost whom the river had borne down, when, from perhaps where he then stood, they had taken

the last fearful plunge. And who were they? he asked himself; who were they that plunged daringly into the rushing river? and for reply the faint breeze seemed to whisper, and the tide to sigh, "Our beauty, some of us!" And then trembling he leaned his hot brow against the cold stone balustrade, fighting with the thoughts that oppressed him, with duty, religion, the world, till, with almost a groan, burst from his lips,

"Save her? My God! yes, as I hope to be saved!"

The early untainted breeze breathed upon his fevered lips as it rode upon the breast of the coming tide; the stars paled more and more, the faint pearly light in the east became roseate; and at last Arthur Sterne stood gazing up towards the glowing cross of the great cathedral, glittering as it was in the morning sun, while now, weary and jaded, he turned to seek his home, but only to gaze with doubting eyes, for he stood face to face with the woman he had sought through the night.

CHAPTER X.

ON THE SEARCH.

DOCTOR THOMAS HARDON, of Somesham, seemed likely to have full enjoyment of his brother's property, for Time kept on busy at work over his harvest. Septimus Hardon slowly and laboriously did copying for the law-stationers, apparently quite content with his lot, for he scarcely ever gave a thought now to the quest he had commenced with old Matt; Lucy toiled on incessantly at her sewing-machine, the bright needle flashing up and down, and the treadles set in motion by her feet were hardly ever still. Journeys were made to and from the warehouse from whence she had her work, but mostly alone, for Lucy had lost her protector: he had not returned since the day upon

which he had been taken ill, and they knew not where he lodged. The information might have been obtained from Agnes, but save a short note or two enclosed in the regular letters sent to Mrs. Jarker, in which she implored her to watch over the child, Lucy had not heard from her. Mr. Sterne came and went, visiting them as he would have visited at any other house, treating Lucy with a calm, cold deference that made her weep bitterly after each visit, and grow paler day by day; for the curate told himself that he had at last conquered a foolish fancy, that he had triumphed as became him, and that all he felt now was a sublime pity which prompted him to watch her when she went out alone, and follow her at a distance till he saw her once more in safety, when he would hurry home; for his heart was very full of pity for Lucy Grey, even though he knew not of the tears she shed in secret.

As to carrying on his researches alone, the very thought of such a proceeding never occurred to Septimus Hardon—it seemed to border too much upon the impossible; and besides, he was

deep in that Slough of Despond—poverty, which, instead of prompting men to energetic action, too often enervates and breeds despair. So he waited on day after day, hoping to see old Matt again, and yet dreading the prosecution of his claim—shrinking when it was named, for he seemed to grow less hopeful as time wore on. The curate had hinted more than once how willing he would be to aid him; but Septimus always shrank so from entering upon the matter, that Mr. Sterne, from motives of delicacy, soon ceased to broach the subject.

The sewing-machine clicked on early and late, and Jean's lark, when he heard it, would set up his crest and whistle away, waking the echoes of the court, while at the open window, when the bird was silent, Jean Marais himself would crane forward and listen eagerly to the fragment of some mournful little air which he could just catch at times, as the machine stopped, and Lucy arranged a portion of her work. But the sweet notes from the first-floor seemed to rouse the lark to fresh exertions, when its master would angrily

chide it, and perhaps cover it with a handkerchief, but only to snatch it away hurriedly.

“For she loves to hear him whistle,” he would say; and then he would smile again, as the bird burst forth once more in its joyous carol.

At times Lucy would ascend to the attic to take up a bunch of green food she had bought for the birds, or a few flowers for the cripple, whose eyes brightened when he saw her, but these visits were mostly paid when *ma mère* was from home; for in spite of her civil words, there was something in the old woman’s quiet smile that chilled her; so that she dreaded meeting her more than if her looks had been those of anger. But she knew not the bitter words that had passed between mother and son upon the subject, when *ma mère* once angrily crushed a bunch of violets Lucy had taken up to the suffering youth.

The sewing-machine was clicking away merrily one day, so that Mrs. Jarker could hear it from her sick-bed; Septimus Hardon was busily copying at his little table, and the lark jocund as ever, when a slow step was heard upon the stairs. Lucy

stopped her machine to listen, and even Septimus raised his head from his work. But there was no mistake—it was not a visitor for upstairs, but old Matt's own shuffling footstep, and Lucy run to admit him.

Paler, thinner, more haggard, he came slowly into the room, rubbing his hands and smiling with pleasure at the warmth of the greeting he received.

“Never better,” he said; “capital, thank you; been ill, though, and not able to get out before, though I was afraid you would get all the work done without me. What have you done since I saw you, sir?”

“Nothing,” said Septimus quietly.

“Didn't expect you had,” said Matt drily. “No offence, sir; but I thought perhaps you might want me; so if you'll get your hat, sir, we'll start at the point where we left off, and see after the doctor.”

“But you will not be well enough,” said Septimus, hanging back from the task—more on his own account than on that of the old man.

“Don’t you be afraid of that, sir. I should have been well weeks ago if it hadn’t been for fidgeting about your affairs, and wanting to get out. I’m as strong as a lion now, sir ; but let’s be at it. I want a new suit of clothes out of the estate, you know, sir, when you get it ;” and the old man chuckled and nodded at Lucy.

Septimus slowly wiped his pen, and carefully put away his paper, sighing the while, for he was unwilling to start, and the fit of eagerness had long ago evaporated ; but at last he declared himself to be in readiness, and the pair once more started off upon their search.

Upon this occasion they directed their steps at once to Finsbury, and, after a slow, and what seemed to Matt a painful, walk, they reached their destination.

“Here is the house,” said Septimus, after a reference to his pocket-book ; “this is the number.”

“H’m !—‘Tollicks’ Registry Office for Servants,’ ” read Matt from the board over the door. “This isn’t the doctor’s. Sure of the number, sir ?”

“Yes,” said Septimus, referring once more to his pocket-book ; “yes ; this is the number I took down.”

“So it is,” said Matt, after a reference to his own memorandum-book. “That’s right enough ; but wait a bit, one never knows where to be right or wrong with numbers ; they always were things as bothered a man ; for you have your numbers so-and-so A, and B, and C, and goodness knows how many more, until you’re regularly puzzled. Perhaps that’s an A, or a B, or something of that kind, and the number we want is somewhere else.”

“Let’s walk on a little,” said Septimus ; and they went slowly down one side and up the other, but this proved to be the only house numbered as they wanted.

“Do you know of a Mr. Phillips, a surgeon, in this neighbourhood ?” said Septimus to the first policeman they met.

The man of order shook his head, beat his white gloves together, and then rearranged the shaken head in his shiny stock before continuing his walk.

“Let’s go to the fountain-head at once,” said Matt; “perhaps they know something about him. Here we are again—‘Tollicks’ Registry Office for Servants.’ Let’s see what Mr. Tollicks knows about him.”

“Stop a minute,” said Septimus, to keep procrastination alive for a few moments longer. “Perhaps there is another door.”

“No more doors there, unless they’re back-doors,” growled Matt; and leading the way, they stood in a floor-clothed room,—the office itself,—furnished with a green-baize-covered table, bearing a stencil-plate, inkstand, and brush; and beside the wall a long bench, upon which sat apparently one of the servants waiting to be hired from ten to four, as announced by a bill in the window, which spoke of cooks, housemaids, and general servants as being regularly in attendance; but most probably the others, tired, had gone home for the day, for the damsel in question was the only one visible. She was “Cornwall sure,” as indicated by the shape of her nose, though any ignorant person might

have been excused for mistaking her for an inhabitant of the sister isle.

The door gave a sharp “ting” as it was opened, and another as it was closed,—the refinement of the old jingling door-bell of the chandler’s shop,—when the young lady on the bench rose, and made a bob and sat down again, and someone from an inner chamber cried, “Coming!” Then a small dog with a very apoplectic voice barked loudly to the tune of a little bell secured to its neck, and came waddling round the counter to smell Septimus Hardon’s legs; when visiting old Matt for the same purpose, that gentleman favoured him with a pinch of snuff dropped softly towards his nose, provoking a most violent fit of sneezing, and a loud and agitated jingling of the tiny bell.

With the exception of the sneezing, there was now silence in the office for a few moments, till the sound of rattling milk-cans upon the pavement was heard. A man gave vent to the well-known melodious London yodel, and then opened the door, which again said “ting,” when

from the inner chamber appeared a tall, stoutish, elderly-young female of very grand deportment, which she displayed to great advantage by making a most ceremonious salute—one that would have been invaluable to a governess in a large-minded family of small means. So elegant was the salute, that even old Matt was staggered, and performed an operation rather rare with him—he took off his hat.

“The side-door, my good man,” said the lady to the milkman, who grinned, winked to himself, and drew the door after him, when, quietly placing the customary “ha’porth” in a cream-tin, he set it in a corner by the door, jangled his cans as he took them up, and then yelled his way down the street.

“Mrs. Tollicks?” said Septimus, raising his shabby hat.

“*Miss* Tollicks,” said the lady, with another profound courtesy almost equal to the former. “Perhaps you will be seated, sir.”

Perhaps he would have been; but as there was only the form upon which the auburn-haired

damsel sat whilst waiting to be hired, Septimus merely bowed again, and said, "Thank you," at the same moment inadvertently directing a glance at the maiden in question.

"Thoroughly trustworthy, and has an excellent character from her last place," said Miss Tollicks, who had seen the glance; "a very good cook—plain cook, early riser, strictly temperate; in fact, a disciple of the late Father Matthew. Requires no followers, and only one half-day out in the month. Only twenty-two; wages twelve pounds; and a capital washer."

The damsel had risen, and stood with her eyes half-closed, head on one side, and her rather large mouth squeezed up into a modest smirk; and as Septimus Hardon knew nothing of the maiden, he was bound to accept Miss Tollicks' eulogium; but as to the last-named quality, it was very evident that the girl was not a capital washer of self, while a detergent applied to her hair would have made a manifest improvement.

"Indeed," said Septimus, bowing; "I am obliged, but—"

“Only *twelve* pounds wages,” said Miss Tollicks with emphasis.

“And very reasonable,” said Septimus ; “but—”

“You will find very few general servants willing to go for less than fourteen,” said Miss Tollicks.

“I suppose not,” said Septimus ; “but at present—”

“Then you don’t think this young person would suit your requirements?” said Miss Tollicks.

“Decidedly not,” said Septimus eagerly, for he was getting so exceedingly confused, that had Miss Tollicks pressed her point, he would most probably have ended by hiring the damsel off-hand ; for every glance directed for help at old Matt glanced off the impenetrable armour in which the old man had encased himself.

“Mary Donovan,” said the lady of the house with dignity, “it is five minutes past four ; you need not wait any longer to-day.”

Mary Donovan rose at the instant, and made a bob to Miss Tollicks, and one each to Matt and Septimus—bobs that were a disgrace to her after the elaborate obeisances she had so lately seen made ; and then she took her departure, played out by a couple of “tings,” Miss Tollicks smiling blandly, and courteously holding her head on one side as she stood waiting to know the object of her visitors’ call.

Miss Tollicks was a lady whom no one would have supposed to have been born a genius, from the utter absence of ennobling qualities in her face ; but for all that she made-up showily, possessed a good figure, had two little corkscrew curls on either side of her face, a suspicion of thinness about her hair-parting, which on a small scale exhibited somewhat the appearance of certain stout ladies’ dresses in the back when they have been without assistance in the hooking department ; for the said parting began correctly, and then gradually opened out, but only to contract again and finish evenly some distance

farther back. By way of head-dress, Miss Tollicks wore a black-velvet blackbird, with handsome gold-bead eyes, the said ornithological headdress being kept in its place by means of a fillet of black velvet and gold twist. A very thick, plain-linked, jet chain was round her neck, a very glossy buckle at her waist, fastening the cincture of her very rusty black-silk dress, slightly rubbed at the plaits; so that altogether Miss Tollicks presented the aspect of a lady superior at the very least.

“We merely called,” said Septimus, after an awkward pause, during which he had been waiting for Matt to begin, “to—er—er—to—er—that is to ask if you could give us any information respecting a Mr. Phillips, a surgeon, who once resided here.”

“Dear me, how disappointing!” said Miss Tollicks. “Now do you know I thought you had come after servants; I did indeed.”

“Really,” said Septimus sadly, “I am sorry to have caused you disappointment; but it was important that I should know, and I called—

urgent—troubled you,” he stammered again, looking in vain at Matt, who only took snuff.

“O, don’t apologise, pray,” said Miss Tollicks; “come in and sit down, and let’s—let me,” she said, correcting herself,—“let me hear what it is. There, don’t laugh at me, for one is obliged to be so particular how one speaks to the grand people who come for servants.”

Miss Tollicks led the way into her inner chamber, where the fat dog slept snoringly in the sunshine; and, after a little hesitation, her two visitors took the proffered chairs.

“Mr. Flips, surgeon,” said the lady of the place, after a little preliminary conversation, “no, I never heard the name, and I’ve been here two years this next week, when my landlord will most likely call. He says he has a bad memory, but he always recollects the quarter-days. He lives down in Dorsetshire, and when he comes up I can ask him if you like; perhaps he would know; or you might write; but he’s sure to write to me directly to say he is coming, so that, as he says, I may be ready for him, just as if one ever was

ready for one's landlord. Two years—yes, just two years," she continued musingly. "There was a whole year at the millinery, which didn't half-pay the rent; for people here don't seem to wear bonnets, and when they do, they've been turned and cleaned and altered or somethinged or anothered, although I put my prices so low that there was no room for a bit of profit. Then there was the fancy stationery three months, which was worse, for the only kind of stationery the people fancied was penny-stamps, which cost me a penny a-piece, and then people either wanted them to be stuck on their letters, or else wrapped up in paper. Then there was the newspaper and periodical trade, which was worse than all; for, as if just out of aggravation, the people always came and asked for the very thing you had not got. I declare that if it wasn't that you can sit down and read your stock, the periodical trade would be unbearable. Only think of the trouble people gave you by ordering things regularly and never coming and fetching them; so that the back numbers used to get piled up most terribly. And now,

you know, I've been six months at this, and it's so trying, you can't think; for, you see, I'm worse off than anybody: I've not got to please the mis-suses—I beg pardon, the *mistresses* only, but the servants; and really, after my experience I can say that there's no pleasing anyone."

Septimus Hardon glanced hopelessly at Matt, but he would not see him, and took pinch after pinch of snuff furiously, with a comical expression upon his countenance the former could not interpret.

"You see, though," continued Miss Tollicks, who seemed to have made up her mind to thoroughly enjoy herself with a good talk; "you see, though, there is one advantage—there's no stock required, and it is genteel; but really, after all, it is so vexatious and pays so badly that I think I shall give it up, and take to tobacco. I suppose it's a business that pays well, and people do use it to such an extent that it's quite wonderful. But let me see! Phillips—Flips—Flips—no, I never even heard of the name; but, do you know, I shouldn't wonder if a doctor did once live here;

for there's a regular street-door bell that rings down-stairs, and another that rings up in the second-floor front, just as the night-bell used to at Doctor Masters's, where I once lived at, as—ahem, ahem!—excuse my cough, pray,” said Miss Tollicks, colouring; “but there!” she said sharply the next moment, “where I lived as lady's-maid, and I don't see why I should be ashamed of it.”

“Hear, hear!” said old Matt, speaking for the first time.

“But can you tell who lived here before you?” said Septimus.

“O, yes; a dairy,” replied Miss Tollicks; “but it was only here six months, and my landlord told me the people didn't pay any rent, but went off in the night so shabby, leaving nothing behind but a black-and-white plaster cow, and a moss-basket with three chalk eggs, in the window; and my landlord says that's why he looks so sharp after me, which isn't nice, you know; but then you can't be surprised. Let me see, I think it was a coffee-house before that.”

“Perhaps,” said Septimus, rising, “you will

find that out for me when your landlord calls. I don't think we will trouble him by writing; and maybe you'll ask him how long it is since a Mr. Phillips lived here, and if he can tell you to where he removed."

"That I will," said Miss Tollicks pleasantly; "and if you would not mind taking one of my cards, you might be able to recommend me to one or two patrons; and you too, sir," she continued, handing one to Matt, which he took with a comical amused expression, and carefully placed inside the lining of his hat.

"Hadn't you better ask for the landlord's address, and write at once?" growled Matt, as soon as they were outside the house.

"Perhaps it would be better," said Septimus, hesitating; "but no, we won't trouble her again; and it would only hasten the matter a day or two—possibly not at all. She has been very civil and obliging."

"Very," said Matt. "Good sort of woman, she seems; but what a tongue! As soon as ever she had trapped us in that room, 'Matt, my lad,'

I said, 'the people in this world are divided into two classes—talkers and listeners. You belong to the second class, so keep your place;' and I did, sir, as you know. I never attempt to tackle a woman on her own ground, sir, which is talking. I can talk, sir, leastwise I could when I was well; but it's my humble opinion that that woman would have rapped out three words to my one."

"There," said Matt, after they had walked a little way along the street, he all the while rubbing his forefinger slowly round and round his pill snuff-box, "I've taken all my snuff, as ought to have lasted till to-morrow night, and all through that precious woman's tongue. Let's go in here, sir, and get a penn'orth."

"Here" was a very dirty-looking little tobacconist's and news-agent's; and, so as to leave no stone unturned, Matt, whilst being served, made inquiry touching Mr. Phillips, a surgeon.

"No," said the woman who served, as she allayed the irritation of her nasal organ by rubbing

it with the back of the hand which held the snuff-scoop, and so provoked a loud fit of sneezing,—
“no, not in my time.”

“How long has that been?” said Matt.

“Five years,” replied the woman.

Septimus Hardon walked out of the shop, and, after paying for his snuff, old Matt followed him into the street, and they bent their steps homewards.

“I’m dull and stupid and not right, you see,” said Matt, “or else I should have known why the name wasn’t in the newest of those two Directories. One, you see, was more than ten years old, and the other—well, it wasn’t the newest. But you leave it to me, sir, and I’ll try and find a medical directory, for I think there is such a thing. I know there is a legal one, for I helped print it; and there’s one for the parsons, so there’s safe to be one for the doctors. I’ll ferret it out, sir; and I shall be better to-morrow. Those look nice, don’t they?” said the old man, stopping short in front of a pork-butcher’s shop.

“Very,” said Septimus dreamily, and without

glancing at the freshly-made chains of sausages hanging from the hooks in the window.

“ You may always buy your sausages here, and depend upon ’em,” said Matt ; “ and if you’ll listen to my advice, you’ll take a pound back with you. They’ll wrap ’em in a bit of paper for you, and you can slip them in your pocket, and have a nice fry for tea when you get home, and then rest content ; for, though we haven’t done much, and I should have liked you to have taken that landlord’s name and address, yet things are getting in train, I can tell you. So you wait quietly at home, sir, till I come again, for I suppose you won’t want to do anything yourself. I shall be stronger and better to-morrow or next day, I hope, for somehow I can’t get along as I used, and feel weak and muddled. But there, sir, slip in and get them sausages, and have a bit of patience, and don’t try to build any more till our mortar’s a bit settled.”

Septimus Hardon smiled sadly at the idea of his being impatient to go on with the search, and, obeying his companion’s best, he obtained

the pound of flesh ; and then they walked slowly on till they were once more within the shadow of the law.

“ And now I’m off, sir,” said Matt, stopping short in Carey-street. “ I think I shall go and lie down.”

“ Can I do anything for you ?” said Septimus earnestly.

“ Yes, sir,” said Matt ; “ let me have my own way, please. You let me go my way, and I’ll work the matter out for you if it’s possible, so that it shall be in trim for the lawyers, and then I’ll give up. But there, I won’t do anything without consulting you first, and—no, thank you ; I’d rather not. No ; I like sausages well enough sometimes, but not to-day, thank you ; I’m off in a moment. Don’t you do anything, whatever you do, to put your uncle on his guard. Depend upon it, he thinks now, after all this time, that you’ve given it quite up ; while, if things go on as I hope, we shall come down upon him one of these days in a way that shall startle him—shake his nerves so that he sha’n’t find a tonic for them.”

Old Matt shuffled off, once more steadily refusing to partake of any refreshment; while Septimus slowly and thoughtfully made his way towards the entrance to the Rents, pondering over his visit to the churches some weeks back, and then thinking that it would be better to settle down contentedly in his present state, for fear that after research, labour, and endless publicity, the words of his uncle should prove to be those of truth, and his condition worse than it was at the present time.

“Better the present doubt and obscurity,” he muttered. “Octavius Hardon, Lavinia Addison, Ellen Morris—all witnesses to the truth, but dead, dead.”

“Stop, stop!” cried a voice, as he turned into the Rents; and the next moment, with his hand to his side, old Matt stood by him, gasping. “I ain’t the thing to-night, sir; I’m ill, but I’ve got it here—here somewhere,” he said, tapping his forehead, “and I can’t get it out. It’s here, though. It’s ‘medicine and attendance, Mrs. Hardon—so much,’ isn’t it? That’s it, sir, ain’t it?”

Septimus stared wonderingly at him.

“You may well look, sir,” said Matt, panting still; “but that’s it, and I’ve seen it somewhere, and I’ll tell you where directly. It all came like a flash just after I left you; there it was, just as I saw it written down: ‘Medicine and attendance, Mrs. Hardon—so much;’ and I can keep seeming to see the words dance before my eyes now. I saw them written down somewhere once, and I can’t just now say where; but I seem to feel that I’ve got them all right, and I shall have it. Good-night, sir. Remember me to Miss Lucy;” and the old man staggered away, muttering aloud, “Medicine and attendance—medicine and attendance;” while more than one person in the street turned to look at the bent figure, to shake a sapient head, and mutter, “Or hospital.”

For poor old Matt looked sick unto death, though Septimus Hardon, deep in his own thoughts, had taken but little notice of the old man’s indisposition.

CHAPTER XI.

LUCY'S REST.

NIGHT after night, noticed by the curate during his wanderings, by *ma mère*, and by Mr. William Jarker, birdcatcher, when distant trips had detained him until late hours, there still burned a feeble light in one of the windows at Bennett's-rents; and by its gleam, until the moon rose above the houses, and looked inquisitively down upon her paper, shedding a silvery light that seemed to quench the rushlight's sickly yellow flame, now sat Lucy Grey far into the long watches, with naught to interrupt her but the occasional long-drawn breath or sigh from the back-room, or the rumble of some vehicle through the distant streets. Once she started up and stood trembling,

for a shrill scream rang upon the night breeze, but silence soon reigned again, and she retook her seat. Patiently bending over her task, with her large eager eyes strained to follow the work of her fingers, the pale girl was busily toiling on. Toiling on at what? Not at the sewing-machine, for its busy throbbing pulse was still, but carefully and slowly writing line after line in a common school copy-book to improve a handwriting already fine, delicate, and ladylike. A slate covered with figures lay too upon the table, while beside it was a French grammar, and the words written in the copy-book were in the same tongue.

And this had been Lucy's task night after night, till the red-rimmed eyes would keep open no longer, and, wearied out, she lay down to dream dreams that brought smiles to her lips, for her visions were of the prize for which she studied. But these nights of toil and the anxiety of her heart had told upon her, and upon this night, the one succeeding the journey to Finsbury, Lucy sat, looking more pale and wan than usual,

and her work progressed but slowly. The place too, and the summer heat, had had their share in producing her sickly pallor, for in Bennett's-rents there was a faint lung-clinging odour that almost seemed to tell that Death had passed over the place to put his seal upon those soon to pass away. Or was it the foul incense men burn to his dread shrine, calling him to their homes—the thin invisible mist rising from filth and rottenness, to blight the rosy cheek of health? There was enough in Bennett's-rents to drive away health, strength, and youth; for premature old age lurked in the foul cisterns, rose from the drains, and dwelt in the crowded habitations, houses made to accommodate six, yet containing perhaps thirty or forty, souls. But Lucy was sick at heart as well. Months upon months had she dwelt in the wretched court, though until now its impurities had not seemed to touch her as she passed to and fro.

The work went on slowly, and, weary and sad at heart, she stopped at times, gazing up at the bright moon, till, recalling her wandering thoughts,

she again bent eagerly to her task. Still her thoughts would not be controlled, and soon the slate took the place of the paper, and her pencil formed two words over which she bent lovingly, and yet with a shudder, as if it were ominous to her hopes that she had written these words, for the pencil gritted loudly over the slate, and the last stroke was made with a harsh grating shriek which sounded loudly in the silence of the night. Still she bent lovingly over the characters, until, drip, drip, drip, the tears fell upon them, and then, as her white forehead sank upon her hands, the long gleaming clusters of her bright hair swept over the slate, and the words were gone, while the girl wept long and bitterly, for her dream of the future seemed rudely broken—that happy dream of her life whose rosy hues had served to soften the misery of her lot. Toiling hard by day to supply the wants of her suffering mother, working by night to make herself more worthy—to raise herself if but a step nearer to him; and now it seemed to her that she had been roughly dashed from the point to which she had climbed,

by the words and looks of a low ruffian whose very presence was repelling.

Suddenly Lucy raised her head, for the night was hot, and the window open, and in the stillness of the hour she heard approaching footsteps—steps that she seemed to know, and her pulses beat tumultuously as they appeared to stop at the end of the court for a few minutes, and then pass on; when, as if a weight had been removed from her heart, the poor girl sighed, breathed more freely, and again bent over her books.

An hour passed, and then once more Lucy looked up, for, clear and sharp, “tap, tap, tap,” came the sound as of something hard, a tiny shot, a pebble striking against the window-panes, and then once more there was silence.

Lucy rose softly, her cheeks pale and lips apart, and stole on tiptoe to the door of the back-room and listened.

All was silent there but the heavy breathing of sleepers, so she again crossed the room, and with the nail of one finger gave a sharp tap upon the pane, then hastily tying on her bonnet and

drawing on a shawl, she once more stood trembling and eagerly listening at the back-room, her pale young face wearing a strange, frightened expression, and then slowly and softly she stole to the door, opened it quietly, and closed it again, to stand outside upon the dark landing gazing fearfully up and down, as if in dread of being molested.

Slowly down she then passed step by step, with the old worn boards now and again creaking sharply beneath her light weight, every rustle of her dress sounding loud and distinct in the silence—down slowly to the dark passage and the front-door, left always on the latch for the convenience of the many lodgers. And now Lucy's heart beat heavily, for she had passed along the entry in an agony of fear, lest she might encounter someone sleeping upon the floor, for at times homeless ones had stolen in and rested there, glad of such a refuge from the night wind.

But Lucy stood at the door in safety, and raised the latch. The paint cracked loudly as the door opened, and admitted the faint light of moon

and lamp, while now the wind sighed mournfully down the court. The next moment the door was closed, and a dark figure had seized Lucy by the hand, and drawn her towards one of the many gloomy entrances, as the heavy step of a policeman was heard to pass the end of the court, his ringing paces gradually growing fainter and fainter, till once more all was still but the moaning sigh of the night wind, as it seemed at times almost to wail for the miseries of Bennett's-rents.

A quarter of an hour, half an hour, an hour passed; but save the occasional rattle of wheels in the great thoroughfare, all was silent. The many doorways in Bennett's-rents seemed to frown darkly and mysteriously as the one lamp flickered, while, where the moonbeams did not fall, there were gloomy shadows. But at last came the light step of Lucy and the soft rustle of her dress as she crept up to the door, passed through to steal once more up the creaking stairs, to throw off bonnet and shawl, and sit down panting and trembling, her breath coming hardly for a while, till tears came to her relief, when she wept

long and bitterly, the heavy booming of a neighbouring clock sending a shudder through her frame.

Now pushing back her hair from her forehead, she looked out angrily upon the night, now drooping and weeping bitterly, her head again sank upon her hands as the tears of hopeless misery gushed from her eyes. The moonbeams shed their silvery lustre upon her head as she bent there, playing amidst the riches of her beautiful hair, caressing it, hiding and glancing from amidst the thick tresses, lingering there, and seeming to shed a halo around. But slowly the radiant orb rode on till but half the bright tresses were in the light, and still slowly the shadows increased as the rays swept by, flooding first one and then another part of the room. Soon all within was darkness, while the court was light; and then slowly the shadow began to climb the houses on the other side, making their dingy walls less loathsome as seen through the silvery medium. But before the lower part of the court was quite in darkness, a heavy, slouching

figure might have been seen to creep up to the house on the opposite side and enter the door. A few minutes after, Lucy Grey started and listened, for, in the strange stillness of the time, a rustling was heard upon the stairs, followed by a faint but laboured breathing ; while, though her light was extinguished, Lucy crouched trembling in her chair, for it seemed to her that she had been watched, and that even now there was a piercing eye at the keyhole, which fixed her to her seat so that she dare not move. But at last, from sheer exhaustion, her fair young head drooped lower and lower towards the table, sinking upon her shapely arms ; when once more came the rumble of a vehicle in the street, the heavy tread of the policeman upon the pavement—this time right along the court—in firm, ringing steps, that gave wrong-doers ample notice of his coming, and then again silence.

They were wild dreams that made fevered the sleep of Lucy Grey. Now it was Arthur Sterne ; now *ma mère* and her son, or the low, bull-dog face of Jarker, that disturbed her rest, and she

moaned in her sleep again and again as the night wore on. The writing upon her slate was gone ; the copies were blurred and tear-blistered, and the poor girl slept heavily and painfully. Now she sighed, now she started, for her heart was rent and torn—as gentle a heart as ever beat in woman's breast ; but, like a blight, the breath of suspicion had rested on her, and she had shrunk back scathed before the man for whose coming it had been the pleasure of her life to watch.

What was there to live for now ? she asked herself again and again. Was life to be only a dreary blank—a struggle for mere existence ? And then she blamed herself for her folly and ambition. Had Arthur Sterne never crossed the light of her life she could have patiently toiled on, never wearying of the complaints of her mother ; but now, after months, almost years of hopefulness, to come to this ! Well might the sleep be fitful, and the dreams those which brought trouble, for the sun of her life seemed clouded, and hope a thing of the past.

Again a sigh, and a few muttered words, and

then the weary head was turned a little so that when the first gray dawn of the coming day crept down the court, and struggled into the room, driving forth shadow after shadow, it rested smilingly upon Lucy's cheek, pausing lovingly upon the first pure thing it had encountered that morning in the misery-smitten region around. Had Arthur Sterne known all, he would have given position, advancement, all, to have pressed his lips where the pale light now rested, and asked for pardon. But he knew only that which he had seen, and, racked by suspicion, he wearied himself with doubt and surmise without end.

Again a sigh, and again a restless turn, when the colour flushed through Lucy's pale cheeks. It was sunrise, and some hopeful thoughts must have come with its brightness; or was it that the words breathed far off above the rushing river had at length reached their goal? But the cheeks soon paled again, the sigh was repeated, and Lucy slept heavily.

“Tsu weet, tsu weet, tsweet, tsweet, tsweet!” sang in long and joyous trill the speckled-breasted

lark, as, raising its crest and the plumage of its throat, it fluttered by the prison-bars, and poured forth that joyous song whose every note told of bright skies, pure air, and the daisy-sprinkled mead; of waving cornfields, rippling brooks, and many-tinted woods. "Tsweet, tsweet, tsweet!" sang the bird of the joyous heart-stirring song, prisoned here in a foul court, but panting for the elastic air and some loving mate.

Lucy started up and looked confusedly round, then gazing towards the sky she became conscious that Mr. William Jarker was upon the housetop amongst his pigeons and sooty lathen architecture, gazing heavily down upon her window. There was a frown upon her brow as she slowly and wearily put aside books and slate, bathed her throbbing temples, and smoothed the escaped locks; and then she stole softly to the corner of the window, where, unseen from above, she could lean her cheek against the paintless frame, and listen to the song of the bird. Sighing heavily as it ceased, she uncovered her sewing-machine, wiped off the dust, and prepared her

work for the coming day. Now she had to cross the room and make sundry little domestic arrangements; now to seek here, now there; but all was done silently, so as not to rouse the sleepers in the next room; though there was none of the old elasticity, for she moved about wearily, sighing as she went.

And now, first one and then another familiar sound told her that the time for labour—that morning was there once more; many steps were heard descending the stairs and passing along the court, the cooing of the pigeons came from the housetops, and the rattle of vehicles rose more loudly from the distant streets.

“Up and dressed, Lucy?” said a voice from the adjoining room.

“Yes, mother dear,” was the reply; and now, after waiting some time for this signal, the wheel spun round, the keen needle darted up and down, and with its sharp click, click, click, sped on Lucy’s sewing-machine.

Then the bedroom-door opened, and Septimus Hardon made his appearance—a worn expression

struggling hard with the smile that greeted Lucy, as he tenderly kissed her, and then hurrying out, he went for his morning walk, to puzzle over his own weakness, his poverty, and the great problem of things in general.

CHAPTER XII.

IN HOSPITAL.

THE more a poor and sensitive man confines himself within doors, the more he troubles himself with the fancy that everyone he meets is staring at and watching him when he stirs out; and this fancy was very strong on Septimus Hardon one day—one very miserable, sloppy wet day, as he made his way towards Lower Serles-place, on account of dilapidations in his boots.

Now experience has taught that holes or seediness generally of the other apparel may to a certain extent be managed, and something like a decent appearance made; the hat may be sponged and ironed, while the brown napless spots are inked, and the bruises, to a certain extent, rubbed out; holes in the coat may be

fine-drawn, and a vigorous brushing will always do something towards renovating the nap, even as soap and flannel will remove the grease; then, too, a good button-up, and a paper collar neatly arranged beneath a clean face and shortly-cut hair, give a finish to a costume by no means rare in London streets. It is only when in company with dirt and squalor that long hair shows to its greatest advantage; and if the hair be long, vain are the efforts made to reform a shabby garb. Your artist may fancy he paints the better by saving the sixpences that should by rights find their way into the pocket of the man of the long tongue and sharp scissors; your poet with rolling eye may also find some hidden advantage, some Samson-like strength in flowing locks; and no doubt Italian liberty would suffer, and Vaterland be blotted and wiped out, if from foreign heads much of the collar-greasing, eye-offending, cheek-tickling appendage were shorn off. We know how the strength of the old judge lay in his locks, and when we meet some brawny hirsute fellow, we are apt to consider him a very Hercules

of strength; but when we encounter long hair in a state of wealth, petted, perfumed, and glossed, after the fashion of the dandies of the Merry Monarch's time, how the mind will feel disposed to look upon the owner of the flowing locks, not as a star of the intellectual sphere, but as a comet of weak intensity; while, when the same lengthy locks are met with in a state of poverty, even the short prison - barber coiffure of the Jarker kind seems preferable.

Taught by adversity, Septimus Hardon had learned to contend with the dilapidations in his clothes,—at times quite ingeniously,—but, like far better men, he had not been able to control his boots. Custom has so much to do with matters of dress, that though shabbiness will pass unnoticed in the throng, any departure from the ordinary laws will draw as much attention to the offender as if he were a visitor from some foreign clime. Sandal-shoon were of course once the correct thing for promenading the crust of the earth; but who now, unless he were an extreme Ritualist, would think of traversing our

muddy streets with bare feet strapped to a sole, and great-toes working in a most obtrusive manner? Certainly not a man of Septimus Hardon's retiring disposition, though, had he felt so disposed, he could not have done so in the present instance, since his boots almost lacked soles. Their decay had been so rapid, that scarcely anything remained but the uppers. He had even taken to wearing his wife's goloshes, until the policeman became more attentive to his quiet footfall than was agreeable. But there is a stretch beyond which even the elasticity of indiarubber will not extend; and now, after putting up with much hard usage, the goloshes had succumbed, and, suffering under a complete reverse of circumstances, the indiarubber was itself completely rubbed out.

As before said, there are many little contrivances for bettering worn costume; but somehow or another a boot bothers the cleverest. String is a wonderful adjunct to garments generally, often acting as a substitute for buttons or braces; in fact, for a man wrecked on a desert

island, there would not be the slightest cause for despair so long as he had string; but even it falls powerless before boots; glue is useless from the damp; while as to paste, it is no better than sealing-wax or gum. Taken altogether, boots are a great nuisance to a poor man; and when they have arrived at such a pitch that they are not worth mending, the best plan to adopt is not to throw them away, or offer them up as an odorous sacrifice to the goddess of poverty upon your household fire, watching their life-like contortions as the leather twists and turns in the hot blaze, but to do as Septimus Hardon did, with many a sigh, as though they had been old friends—sell them.

Septimus sold his boots to Isaac Gross, in Lower Serles-place, after trying hard to get another day's wear out of them. It had been a fierce battle, and he had found the arguments adduced by his leather friends too strong to be resisted. He parted from them with regret, although they had never been to him the friends he tried to believe. To begin with, they had

always pinched him terribly, raising blisters upon his heels, painfully chafing his toes, bringing a tender place upon one foot, and fostering a corn upon the other; but now they had been parted with in exchange, with so much current coin added, for a pair of Isaac Gross's translations.

It might reasonably be supposed that old Matt had introduced Septimus as a customer; but no, this would have been introducing him to the abode of which he was ashamed; and Septimus had long since discovered the spot for himself, and come to the conclusion that it was a place where he could well suit himself, or rather the requirements of his pocket.

Isaac was smoking away as usual, and giving the finishing touch to a boot-sole by means of a piece of broken glass, whose keen edge took off minute shavings of the leather. Mrs. Slagg was busily carrying on trading transactions with a dirty man, and giving the best price for a barrowful of old newspapers; but both Isaac and Mrs. Slagg seemed out of spirits, and when a customer presented himself in the shape of Sep-

timus Hardon, the translator put down his work slowly, sighed, laid his pipe upon a shelf, and seemed to carry out his bargain with more than his usual heaviness. As a rule, Isaac was a man given to smiling—smiling very slowly, and bringing his visage back to its normal state, a solid aspect; but there was no smile visible now; and when his visitor for “three-and-nine and the old uns,” became the lucky possessor of a pair—no, not a pair—of two Oxonian shoes, Isaac took the money with another sigh, put it in an old blacking-bottle upon the shelf, which he used as a till, dropped the old boots upon a heap close by, took up his pipe, smoked, sighed, and then scraped away at his boot-sole without taking a single peep at his neighbour.

For Isaac Gross was sore at heart concerning the state of his old friend Matt, as sore at heart as was his customer; and when, slightly limping and pinched, Septimus creaked away in his new shoes, Mrs. Slagg having finished her paper purchases, and retaken her seat inside her door,—a seat she seldom quitted, making her cus-

tomers perform the weighing and lifting when practicable,—she peeped round the door-jamb twice in vain; and though trade was prosperous as her love, in spite of its being enshrined so softly in fat, Mrs. Keziah Slagg's heart was also sore, and she too sighed.

The feeling that everyone was watching him was stronger than ever upon Septimus Hardon that morning as he made his way along the big streets and alleys on his way towards one of the hospitals, and after letting the matter sleep as it were for some time, he had now awakened to the fact that he should like to prosecute his claim; though he told himself frequently that he was too weak and wanting in decision to go on without help—the help he could not now obtain. He knew that Mr. Sterne would willingly assist him, but his was not the required help; and he shrank from making him his confidant, while he eagerly sought the aid of the old printer now it was not forthcoming.

There are some strange contradictions in the human heart; and at the present time, had old

Matt presented himself to go on with the search in the unbusiness-like way already followed, the chances are that Septimus Hardon would have shrunk from it, or allowed himself unwillingly to be dragged into farther proceedings.

But old Matt was not present; and now, with the idea troubling him that much time had been wasted, and the matter must be at once seen to, Septimus Hardon made his way towards the hospital; not that he was ill in body, though troubled greatly in mind concerning the man who had been his friend in the hardest struggle of his life. For there were strong passions in the vacillating soul of Septimus Hardon, and he had been greatly moved when, after another long absence, during which he had anxiously waited for the old man, a letter had been delivered, telling how that Matthew Space lay seriously ill in a hospital-ward.

For the first few days after their parting, Matt's last words had strangely haunted Septimus, and he could not rest for thinking of them; but they grew fainter with the lapse of time; Matt came

not to spur him once more to his task, and he sank lower and lower, while Doctor Hardon of Somesham, portly and smiling, grew great in the estimation of the people of the little town.

Septimus had tried more than once in his unbusiness-like, haphazard way to find out the residence of old Matt, at such times as the thoughts of his last words were strong upon him. "He said he was ill, and then talked of medicine and attendance. He was wandering," said Septimus. "I remember I had great difficulty in getting him along. Perhaps he is dead. Well, well; so with all of us. Let it rest, for I'll take no farther steps."

A rash promise to make, as he felt himself when one day came the few lines written in a strange hand, asking his attendance at the hospital. Only a few lines in a crabbed hand, without a reference to the search; but now the desire had risen strong in him once more, though he called himself selfish to think of his own affairs at such a time.

Septimus was not long in responding to the

note, but he found the old man delirious. The second time, Lucy begged to go and see her old friend, and wept bitterly over his shrivelled hand ; but the old man was incoherent, and knew them not.

And now for the third visit Septimus made his way to the hospital, where he found the old man apparently sinking from the effects of some operation. The doctor had just left, when one of the nurses, a great, gaunt, bony woman, with a cat-like smile, and a fine high colour in her cheeks, ushered the visitor to the bedside—a bed, one of many in the light, clean, airy ward.

Septimus Hardon was shocked at the change which had taken place in the old man, as he lay with his hands spread out upon the white coverlet of the bed, pale and glassy-eyed, and rather disposed to wander in his speech ; but his face seemed to light up when he heard his visitor's voice.

“ No ; no better,” he whispered. “ Let's see, I told you, didn't I ? Mrs. Hardon, medicine and attendance, wasn't it ? To be sure it was. Yes,

medicine and shocking bad attendance here. That's it; and I can't tell you any more. I'm falling out of the forme, sir, unless some of these doctors precious soon tighten up the quoins."

"No, no," said Septimus cheerily, "not so bad as that; a good heart is half the battle."

"Yes, yes, yes, so it is," whispered the old man feebly; "but, I say, is she gone?"

Septimus told him the nurse had left the room, and the old man continued:

"You can't keep a good heart here, sir, no-how. I wouldn't have come if I'd known all I know now. You saw her, didn't you?"

"The nurse?" said Septimus.

"Yes, her," replied the old man, shuddering; "she's a wretch, with no more feeling in her than a post. She'll do what the porters shrink from, sir. They have to carry the—you know what I mean, sir—down to the deadhouse; and I've known her laugh at the young one, and do it herself in a way that makes your blood run cold. Just wink, sir, if you see her coming. She'll be

here directly with my wine or jelly: says I'm to have some on the little board, don't it?"

Septimus looked at the board above his head, and found that wine was ordered.

"Yes," said the old man, "the doctors are trumps, sir, everyone of them; and no poor fellow out of the place could get the care and attention I've done here. My doctor couldn't do more if I paid him ten pound a day; and I always feel wonderful after he's gone; seems to understand my chronics, sir, as you wouldn't believe in. But those nurses, sir—don't tell 'em I said so, but they're devils, sir, devils. Medicine and attendance, sir; it's all the first and none of the last."

"Hush," said his visitor, seeing as he thought that the old man was beginning to wander, "Mrs. Hardon would have liked to see you, and Lucy; but she could not leave her mother to-day."

"God bless her!" said the old man fervently. "He asleep in the bed there told me she came the other day, looking like an angel of comfort in this dreary place, sir. God bless her! Tell

her, sir, that the old man's true as steel, sir; the old blade's notched and rusty, but he's true as steel, sir. Do you hear? tell her that old Matt's true as steel. But these nurses, sir," he whispered, holding by his visitor's coat, and drawing him nearer, "they're devils, sir, regular devils!"

"Not quite so bad as that," said Septimus, smiling.

"Not so bad, sir? Worse, sir, worse; ever so much worse. They'd do anything. There's no Sisters of Mercy here, sir, like they're talking of having at some places; they're sisters of something else—she-demons, sir, and one daren't complain or say a word. They'd kill a poor fellow as soon as look at him, and do, too,—dozens."

"Nonsense," said Septimus, smiling, "don't be too hard, Matt."

"'Tain't nonsense, sir," whispered the old man eagerly. "I ain't wandering now, though I have been sending up some queer proofs—been touched in the head, you know, and thought I was going; but it didn't seem to matter much

if I could only have been easy in my mind, for I wanted to be out of my misery. But I couldn't be comfortable on account of the medicine and attendance, and your uncle. What business has he to get himself made head doctor here, sir, just because I came; and then to set the nurses against me to get me out of the way? He knows I'm against him, and mean you to have your rights, and he's trying with medicine and attendance to—no, stop, that's not it," whispered the old man, "I've got wrong sorts in my case, and that's not what I wanted to say." And then for a few moments it was pitiable to witness the struggle going on against the wandering thoughts that oppressed him; but he seemed to get the better of his weakness, and went on again.

"There, that's better, sir; your coming has seemed to do me good, and brightened me up. I get like that sometimes, and it seems that I've no power over my tongue, and it says just what it likes. Tell Miss Lucy I'm getting better, and that I want to get out of this place. I know what I'm saying now, sir, though I can't make it quite

right about that medicine and attendance that we wanted to know about; for it bothers me, and makes my head hot, and gets mixed up with the medicine and attendance here. But I shall have it right one of these days; I did nearly, once, but it got away again."

In his anxiety now to know more, Septimus drew out paper and pencil.

"Don't think about it now," he said; "but keep these under your pillow, and put it down the next time you think anything."

Old Matt smiled feebly, and drew forth his old memorandum-book, and slowly opening it, showed the worn stumpy piece of pencil inside.

"I'd thought of that, sir, and should have done so before, only I was afraid that I might put down the wrong thing—something about the nurses, you know, when they would have read it, and then, perhaps, I shouldn't have had a chance to say any more. And 'tisn't really, sir, it isn't nonsense about them. You think I'm wandering, and don't believe it; and it's just the same with the doctors—they don't believe it neither. There

was one poor chap on the other side of the ward, down at the bottom there—he told the doctor his nurse neglected him, and drank his wine, putting in water instead, beside not giving him his medicine regular; so the old doctor called for the nurse, and—”

“But you must not talk any more,” said Septimus kindly, “you are getting exhausted.”

“I ain’t,” said the old man angrily; “it does me good, revives me; and you don’t believe me, that’s what it is.”

“Yes, I do, indeed,” cried Septimus.

“Then let me finish,” whispered the old man. “Doctor Hardon called and asked her where she saw the entry. There, now, there,” whimpered Matt, “see what you’ve done: you made me upset a stickful of matter, and got me all in a pye again. No; all right, sir, I see, I see—he asked her about it before the patient, speaking very sharply, for the doctors mean well, sir. And then what did the old crocodile do, sir, but just turn her eyes towards the whitewash, smooth her apron, raise her hands a bit, and then, half

smiling; looks at the doctor like so much pickled innocence, but never says a word; while he, just to comfort the poor fellow, told him to keep up, and it should all be seen to; and then there was a bit of whispering between the doctor and the nurse, and then he went off. But I could see who was believed, for I heard the doctor mutter something about sick man's fancies as he came across to me. That poor chap died, sir!"

Just then, Septimus gave the old man a meaning look, for one of the nurses came up with a glass of wine, and smiled and curtsied to the visitor.

"I hope he ain't been talking, sir?" said the woman, in a harsh grating voice with the corners a little rubbed down; "getting on charming, ain't he, sir? only he will talk too much.—Now drink your wine up, there's a good soul. Don't sip it, but toss it down, and it will do you twiced as much good;" and while the old man, with the assistance of his visitor, raised himself a little, she gave his pillow two or three vengeful punches and shakes as she snatched it off the bed, the

result of her efforts being visible in a slit across the middle, which she placed undermost.

“Yes,” muttered Matt when the woman had gone. “Yes; toss it down, so as not to taste it. Why, that was half water—beautiful wines and spirits as they have here, sir. That’s the very one herself, sir. She killed him.”

“Killed who?” exclaimed Septimus, horrified.

“Don’t shout, sir; leastwise, not if you want to see me again,” said Matt grimly. “Killed that poor fellow I was telling you about. She never forgave him, and a week afterwards and there was the screen round his bed, and the porters came and carried him away. She killed him, sure enough, and I ain’t agoing to tell you about the bother there was with his friends about the doctors, and what they did to him afterwards, it might upset you. It almost does me; not that I care much, for it don’t matter when you’re gone, and I’ve got no friends.”

“Hush, pray; it can’t be so,” exclaimed Septimus, shuddering.

“No, of course not,” chuckled the old man,

brightening up from the effects of his stimulant, "O, no; sick man's fancies, sir, ain't they? Just what everyone would say; but she killed him all the same, just as dozens more have been killed here. It don't take much to kill a poor fellow hanging in the balance—him in one scale, and his complaint in the other. The doctor comes and gets in the same scale with him, and bears him down a bit right way; but then as soon as the doctor's gone, the nurse goes and sits in the other scale, and sends him wrong way again. Good nursing's of more consequence sometimes than the doctoring, I can tell you, sir, and if I'd had good nursing I shouldn't have been here at all. Ikey means well, you know, sir; and so does Mother Slagg, eh? but you don't know them, sir, and it don't matter."

"But had you not better be silent now?" hinted Septimus.

"No," said the old man testily; "being so quiet, and having no one to talk to has half-killed me as it is. I don't want to be killed, I want to get out, sir. And, mind you, I don't say about

that poor fellow that she poisoned him, or choked him, or played at she-Othello with the pillow, sir ; but there's plenty of other ways of doing it. The doctor knows the man's condition, and his danger, and orders him such and such things to keep him going, and bring him round, eh ?”

Septimus nodded, for the old man paused for breath ; though the wine he had taken made him talk in a voluble and excited manner, but still with perfect coherence.

“ Well, sir ; and who's got to carry out the doctor's orders ? Why, the nurse, to be sure. Just push the pillow a little more under my head, sir ; she's made it uncomfortable. That's it ; thank you, sir. Well, you nor no one else won't believe that a nurse here would do anything wrong. But now, look here : suppose you see that a lamp wants trimming, what do you do ? You give orders for it to be trimmed, sir, don't you ?”

Septimus nodded again.

“ Well, then,” whispered the old man, hooking one of his long fingers in a buttonhole of

his visitor's coat; "suppose they don't trim the lamp; suppose it isn't trimmed, eh? what then?"

"It goes out!" said Septimus.

"To be sure—exactly, sir; and there have been lots of lamps go out here. They won't trim them, or forget to trim them, and tell themselves they're only sparing the poor creatures misery, while no one dares to speak about it. Talk of death, sir, they think no more of it here, sir, than one does of snuffing out a candle. You see, decent women won't come to a place like this to do the work these nurses do. It's only to be done for money or love. Now it's done for money, and while it's done for money it can only be done by hard, heartless, drinking creatures who've got women's shapes and devils' hearts, sir. But the doctors are all right, sir, only that they don't see all we poor patients see. If skill and doctoring will put me right, sir, I shall be put right, sir. But I'm scared about it sometimes, and half afraid that some of those beauties will weight the wrong scale so heavily that the doctors won't pull me

square. Sick man's fancies, sir, eh? Wanderings, ain't they?"

Septimus Hardon knew not what to say, but whispered such comfort as he could.

"Something ought to be done, you know," said the old man feebly; "but don't hint a word of what I've said, sir, to a soul—please don't," he said pitifully. "You see that all these goings on prey upon a poor fellow's mind; and if he isn't low-spirited lying in a hospital-ward, when is he likely to be? One wants sympathy and comfort, sir, and to feel that there's someone belonging to you who cares for you, and is ready to smooth your pillow, and lay a cold hand upon your hot forehead, and say 'God bless you!' and I've no one, no one;" and the old man's voice grew weak and quavering.

"Come, come," whispered Septimus, "take heart, Matt; we'll come as often as they will let us. And you are getting better; see how you have chatted. You are only low now from the reaction. Try and rest a bit, and get rid of some of these fancies."

Old Matt's eyes turned angrily upon his visitor as he exclaimed, "I tell you they are not fancies, sir, but truth. I wouldn't have come if I'd known, for I've seen men drink, and women drink; but never anyone like these she-wolves. Would you trust anyone you loved to the care of a woman who drank, sir?"

"No!"

"They say they must have support, and I suppose they must; but it's hard, hard, hard!" groaned the old man, and he shut his eyes, seeking out the hand of his visitor, and holding it tightly, until, by the rules of the place, he was obliged to leave.

CHAPTER XIII.

MR. JARKER IS "A BIT ODD."

THERE had been no occasion for Mr. William Jarker to carry out the threat he had once made, for in all the long space of time during which Agnes Hardon's child was in Mrs. Jarker's care, the money was always paid, faithfully and regularly, once a week, but at how great a cost to its mother none but the Seer of all hearts could tell; and always, in spite of sickness and misery, pain, and the hard bondage of her life, Jarker's wife was tender and loving to the little one within her charge. Perhaps it was the memory of another pair of bright eyes that had once gazed up into her own, perhaps only the loving promptings of her woman's heart; but

when, by stealth almost, Agnes Hardon came to kiss her child, she left tearfully but rejoicing, for there was proof always before her of the gentle usage in the fond way in which the little thing clung to its nurse. The preference may have wrung her heart, but it was but another sorrow to bear, and, bending beneath her weight of care, she came and went at such times as seemed best for avoiding Jarker, the curate, and Septimus Hardon.

It was in her power to have let Lucy know where old Matt lodged; but of late they had met but little, and then, in their hurried interviews, his name was not mentioned, for the sorrows of the present filled their hearts.

But now Agnes Hardon was in greater trouble, for something whispered her that this sickness of poor Mrs. Jarker was a sickness unto death, and her soul clave to the suffering, ill-used woman who had filled the place of mother to her child; while, at the same time, she trembled for the future of her little one after each visit—ever feeling the necessity, but ever dreading, to take

it away, for truly there was a change coming ; and time after time when she left the garret, it was with a shudder, for there seemed to be a shadow in the room.

It was almost impossible to ascend the creaking stairs to the garret tenanted by Mr. Jarker without hearing Mrs. Sims, who, through some spiritual weakness, had left the house in the square to return once more to the Rents—a court honoured by most of those unfortunates who, from unforeseen circumstances, fell from the heights of the square ; while the latter was always looked up to, in its topmost or basement floors, for promotion by the more fortunate tenants of the Rents ; and now an ascending visitor was almost certain to hear the melancholy, sniffing woman blowing her fire. Generally speaking, we see bellows hang by the mantelpiece, with a time-honoured, bees'-waxy polish glossing them, as though they were family relics whose services were seldom called into requisition ; but *chez* Mrs. Sims, the bellows had rather a bad time of it, and were worked hardly enough to make them short-winded. They

already wheezed so loudly that it was impossible to take Mrs. Sims' bellows for anybody else's bellows; and this was probably due to their having inhaled a sufficiency of ashy dust to make them asthmatic, while the nozzle was decayed and burned away from constant resting upon the specially-cleared bottom-bar; the left half of the broken tongs doing duty for the vanished poker, borrowed once to clear the grating in the court, and never returned, for the simple reason that it found its way to Mrs. Slagg's marine-store shop, where it stayed in consideration of the porter receiving the best price given, namely, twopence.

Your boots might creak, and, as was their wont, the stairs would crack and groan, but still there was the sound of the bellows to be heard as you ascended the staircase—puff, puff, puff; and the stooping woman's stays crackled and crumpled at every motion, for Mrs. Sims, from always requiring support, external as well as internal, sought the external in whalebone, though for the internal she preferred rum. There was always "suthin' as wanted a bit of fire:"

perhaps it was washing-day, which, from the small size of Bennett's-rents' wardrobes, happened irregularly, with Mrs. Sims three times a-week, when the big tin saucepan used for boiling divers articles of wearing-apparel, in company with a packet of washing-powder, would be placed upon the little damaged grate, upon which it would sit like Incubus, putting the poor weak fire quite out of heart, when it had to be coaxed accordingly. Sometimes the bellows were required to hurry the "kittle," a battered old copper vessel that never boiled if it could help it, and, when compelled by the said hurrying, only did so after passing through a regular course of defiant snorts, even going so far as to play the deceiver, and sputter over into the fire, pretending to be on the boil when many degrees off, and so spoiling Mrs. Sims' tea—never the strongest to be obtained. Sometimes, again, the bellows were required to get a decent fire to cook a bit of steak for the master's dinner, or even "to bile the taters." At all events, of all Mrs. Sims' weaknesses, the principal lay in her bellows, and she could generally find an excuse for a good

blow, accompanied sometimes by a cry over the wind-exhalers, as she sniffed loudly at her task.

There is no doubt but that in her natural good-heartedness Mrs. Sims would have operated quite as cheerfully upon any neighbour's fire as she did now upon the handful of cinders in Mrs. Jarker's grate; for, in spite of her sniffs, her weakness for the internal and external support, and her whining voice, Mrs. Sims was one of those women who are a glory to their sex. Only a very humble private was she in the noble army, but one ever ready for the fight: fever, cholera, black death, or death of any shade, were all one to Mrs. Sims, who only seemed happy when she was in trouble. If it was a neighbour who could pay her, so much the better; if it was a neighbour who could not, it mattered little; send for Mrs. Sims, and Mrs. Sims came, ready to nurse, comfort, sit up, or do anything to aid the needy; and old Matt had been heard more than once to wish she had been a widow.

Poor Mrs. Jarker would have suffered badly but for this woman's kindness; many a little

neighbourly act had been done by Lucy, but Mrs. Jarker's need was sore, and beyond minding the child for her occasionally, Lucy's powers of doing good were circumscribed. And now, one night, sat Mrs. Sims, sniffing, and forcing a glow from the few embers in the Jarker grate as she made the sick woman a little gruel.

Mr. William Jarker ascended the stairs after having had "a drop" at the corner—that is to say, two pints of porter with a quartern of gin in each; and upon hearing the noise of the bellows he uttered what he would have denominated "a cuss," since he bore no love for Mrs. Sims, and her sniff annoyed him; but when, upon ascending higher, he found that the sound did not proceed, as he expected, from the second floor, but from his own room, he began to growl so audibly that the women heard him coming like a small storm, and trembled, since Mr. Jarker was a great stickler for the privacy of his own dwelling, which he seemed to look upon as a larger sort of cage in which he kept his wife.

But although forbidden to enter the room,

Mrs. Sims glanced at the pallid sufferer lying in the bed, with the feeble light of a rush candle playing upon her features ; and muttering to herself, "Not if he kills me," resolved not to abdicate ; and then, after a few final triumphant puffs, dropping at the same time a tear upon the top of the bellows—a tear of weakness and sympathy—she laid down the wind instrument upon which she had been playing, and thrust an iron spoon into the gruel upon the fire, stirring it round so energetically that a small portion was jerked out of the saucepan upon the glowing cinders, and hissed viciously, forming a fitting finale to Mr. Jarker's feline swearing.

But the gruel did not hiss and sputter as angrily, nor did the erst glowing cinders look so black, as did Mr. William Jarker when he found "the missus still abed," and Mrs. Sims in possession.

"I have said as I won't have it," growled Mr. Jarker ; "and I says agen as I won't have it. So let people wait till I arsts em afore they takes liberties with my place. So now p'r'aps you'll

make yourself scarce, Missus Sims ;" and then the birdcatcher crossed over to, and began muttering something to, his wife.

But Mrs. Sims was nothing daunted ; she was in the right, and she knew it, and though her hands trembled, and more of the gruel fell hissing into the fire, as the tears of weakness fell fast, she stood her ground firmly.

"When I've done my dooty by her, as other people, whom I won't bemean myself to name, oughter have done, Mister Jarker, I shall go, and not before," said Mrs. Sims. "It's not me as could sit down-stairs and know as that pore creetur there was dying for want of a drop of grule, and me not come and make it, which didn't cost you a farden, so now then !" Here Mrs. Sims bridled a great deal and sniffed very loudly ; a couple of tears falling into the fender "pit-pat."

"Don't jaw," said Bill gruffly, making a kind of feint with his hand as he stooped down to light his short black pipe by thrusting the bowl between the bars.

Mrs. Sims flinched as if to avoid a blow, to

the great delight of Mr. Jarker; but exasperated him directly after by sniffing loudly, over and over again, producing, by way of accompaniment to each sniff, a low and savage growl and an oath.

"Well, I'm sure," exclaimed Mrs. Sims, "how polite we're a-growing!" But catching sight of the smouldering fire in the ruffian's eye, she hastily poured out the gruel, repenting all the while, for the poor woman's sake, that she had spoken; but upon taking the hot preparation with some toast to the invalid she found her kindness unavailing, for though Mrs. Jarker sat up for a minute and tried to take it, she sank back with a faint sigh, and with an imploring look, she whispered her neighbour to please go.

"Not till I've seen you eat this, my pore dear soul," said Mrs. Sims boldly, though, poor woman, she was all in a tremble, and kept glancing over her shoulder at Jarker, who, with his back to the fire and his hands in his pockets, glowered and scowled at the scene before him. Mrs. Sims passed her arm round the thin, wasted form, and supported the invalid; but, after vainly trying

to swallow a few spoonfuls, the poor woman again sank back upon her pillow, sighing wearily, while the sharp, pecking sound made by one of the caged birds against its perch, sounded strangely like the falling of a few scraps of soil upon a coffin—"Ashes to ashes—dust to dust." And then, for some minutes, there was silence in the room, till Mrs. Jarker turned whisperingly to her friendly neighbour, to beg that she would go now and not rouse Bill, who was a bit odd sometimes.

So, saucepan in hand, Mrs. Sims wished the invalid "Good-night;" and then, trembling visibly, sidled towards the door, evidently fearing to turn her back to Mr. Jarker, who was still growling and muttering, as if a storm were brewing and ready to burst; but Mrs. Sims' agitation caused her first to drop her iron spoon from the saucepan, and then, as she stooped to recover it, to flinch once more, to the ruffian's great delight, as he made another pugilistic feint—a gymnastic feat that he had learnt through visiting some marsh or another when a fight was to come off

between Fibbing Phil and Chancery Joe—a feat that consisted of a violent effort to throw away the right fist, and a quick attempt at catching it with the left hand. But Mrs. Sims managed to get herself safely outside the door, and lost no time in hurrying down the stairs, breathing more freely with every step placed between her and the ruffian; but she shrieked loudly on reaching the first landing, and dropped both saucepan and spoon, for the door was savagely thrown open, and the bellows came clattering after her down the stairs; and all in consequence of Mr. Jarker being a bit odd.

"A bit odd!"—in one of those fits which had often prompted him to strike down his weak, suffering, patient wife with dastardly, cruel hand, and then to kick her with his heavy boots, or drag at her hair until her head was bleeding—oddness which made the tiny child in the room shrink from him; while before now it had been traced on the poor woman's features in blackened and swollen bruises. But shrieks, and the falling of heavy blows, were common sounds in Bennett's-

rents, and people took but little notice of Mr. Jarker's odd fits.

Bill took no heed to the weary, strangling cough which shook his wife's feeble frame, but smoked on furiously till the fire went out. She would not get up to put on more coals, and he wasn't agoing to muck his hands; for, as has been before hinted, Mr. Jarker had soft, whitish hands, which looked as though they had never done a hard day's work; and at last, when the place looked more cheerless and dull than usual, he prepared himself for rest.

"You're allus ill," growled the ruffian, who had had just drink enough to make him savage; "and it's my belief as you wants rousing up." But there came no answer to his remark. The little one slept soundly upon the two chairs which formed its bed, and, with half-closed eyes, the woman lay, breathing very faintly, as her lips moved, forming words she had heard from Mr. Sterne.

Bill felt himself to be ill-used, and was very sulky, a feeling which made him kick his boots

to the end of the room, where one knocked over a linnet's cage, when, still growling, the owner had to go and pick it up, which he did at the expense of his dignity, and there and then shook the cage till the unoffending bird rustled and fluttered about, panting and terror-stricken, to be half-drowned by the water he poured into its little glass the next minute. For, what business had his wife to be ill and allus having parsons and Mrs. Simses a-pottering about in his place? Hadn't he made a row about it when she came when the kid was born, and hadn't she allus come at uncomfortable times since? Didn't she come when it died, and weren't things uncomfortable now, and she a-making them worse? He wouldn't have it—that he wouldn't; and, growling and swearing in a low tone, Mr. Jarker divested himself of a part of his attire, and threw himself upon the bed.

The rushlight danced and flickered, and a few drops of rain pattered against the window as the night-breeze sighed mournfully down the court; first one and then another bird scraped at its

perch, roused as it had been by the noise and light, so that it sounded again and again like the earth upon the coffin-lid; some loose woodwork amongst the pigeon-traps upon the roof swung in the wind, and beat against the tiles, and then all was very quiet and still in the wretched attic.

"Bill—Bill, dear," murmured a voice after a while—a strange harsh-sounding voice, as if it came from a parched and fevered throat; "Bill!"

No answer, only the heavy breathing of the ruffian, and the pattering as of earth upon the coffin-lid.

"Bill—Bill, dear—water!" whispered the voice once more; but there was no answer, only the restless pattering noise of the birds. Then again silence so still and profound that it seemed hardly to be London. But the silence was broken by a little liquid trilling laugh, the laugh of the child, as some bright-hued happy dream passed over its imagination; though there was silence again the next moment, to be broken once more by the strange husky voice, a voice that seemed new to

the place, as in almost agonising tones it whispered :

“ Kiss me, Bill !”

But there was for response only the sound as of the earth pattering upon the coffin-lid more fitfully and hollow. While now, slowly and timidly, a thin white arm was raised, and, seen there in the dim light, it was as though it was waved threateningly above the drunken ruffian's head ; but no—there was no threat in the act—no calling down of judgment from on high ; for the arm was passed lovingly, tenderly, round the coarse bull neck, and still there was no response to the appeal.

“ Kiss me, Bill !” was once more whispered ; but a long, deep-drawn, stertorous breath told that William Jarker slept heavily, as the arm lay motionless, clasping his neck ; and then came a sigh, as piteous and heart-rending as ever rose from suffering breast.

On sped the hours ; the rushlight burned down into the socket, flickered once, and expired ; the distant sounds of traffic floated by once or

twice ; the customary heavy tramp of the policeman was heard to pass along the court ; and now and then the ruffian breathed more stertorously than usual, or ejaculated some unconnected words in his sleep. Then the child started and whimpered for a few minutes, but sank to sleep again ; and still through the night came that restless, pattering noise, that hollow rattle as of dry earth—"ashes to ashes, dust to dust"—the sound as of dry earth falling upon a coffin-lid.

The stars paled as they set ; the morning came, and the red-eyed lamplighter hurried from post to post, extinguishing the sickly-looking gas-jets ; the noises in the streets grew louder and louder, and many a weary client lodging near woke to wonder whether his case would come on that day. The men in Bennett's-rents who had work slowly tramped to it, many who were without rose to seek it, while others, again, to use their own words, took it out in sleep, and amongst these was Mr. William Jarker.

"Mammy, mammy !" at length rang in pitiful tones upon the ruffian's ear, and as he woke to

the sensations of a hot, aching, fevered head and furred tongue, he tried to clear his misty, spirit-clouded faculties.

"Mammy, mammy!" again cried the child, who had climbed upon the bed, and was shaking her foster-mother; "mammy, mammy!" she cried more pitifully, and then burst into a loud wail at her inability to wake her.

"Yah-h-h-h!" roared Bill without moving; when, at the dreaded sound, the little thing ceased its cry, and, cowering beside the sleeping woman, laid a sunny head upon her cheek, and passed two tiny, plump arms round her neck, in a soft, sweet embrace that has power in its innocent love to warm even the coldest, though futile here.

"Blame it, how cold!" growled Mr. Jarker, trying to raise the arm that had lain upon his neck the long night through; but it was stiff and heavy; and, shrinking hastily away, the frightened man sat up, gazed for an instant at the face beside him, and then leaping, with a howl of terror, from the bed, rushed half-clad from the room.

And why did he flee? Was it that there was

still the sound as of falling earth rattling upon a coffin-lid? For what was there to fear in the pale face of that sleeping woman, with the earthly pains and sorrow-traces faded away, to leave the countenance calm, softened, and almost beautiful; for there had come back something of the old, old look of maidenhood and happier times, when she had looked with admiration upon the stalwart form of the ruffian she had wed, and believed in him, wedding him to become his willing slave? Hers had been a hard life; born in misery and suffering, growing under sorrow and poverty and vice; yet had she been a woman with a woman's heart. But now she slept, to wake, we hope, where justice is tempered by mercy, and the secrets and sorrows of every heart are known. But now she slept, and her sleep must have been peaceful—happy—for the lines of sorrow had passed away, and there was a smile upon her lip.

Nothing to fear. Guilt fled, but Innocence stayed, and the soft, silky curls of the child were mingled with the thin dark locks of the woman, as a tiny smooth round cheek rested upon the marble

temple, and a little hand played in the cold breast that should never warm it more.

Nothing to fear ; though the simple people who soon assembled in the room spoke in whispers, passing in and out on tiptoe, many with their aprons to their eyes ; while poor Mrs. Sims, when she returned to her own room with the child, quieted it by means of a large slice of sugared bread-and-butter, and relieved her own mind by sitting down to have a good long, soft blow at the fire, what time the tears pattered down plenteously on the bellows.

Nothing to fear ; for calm and still was the face of the sleeping woman, who with her latest breath had rendered the love she had sworn to her husband, and now in peace she rested ; but still through the long day, through the long night, and when the hard, harsh shape of the coffin stood in the room, there came at intervals the sharp, hollow, rattling noise, as of earth falling upon its lid, when the listeners' ears would strain to catch those awful accompanying words—
"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust !"

CHAPTER XIV.

SICK MAN'S FANCIES.

THERE was a strange battle in the breast of the Reverend Arthur Sterne about this time. Now he would feel satisfied in his own mind that he had obtained the victory over self, while directly after, an encounter with Lucy, or some little incident that occurred during one of his visits, would teach him his weakness. Pained, and yet pleased, he left Septimus Hardon's rooms on the day after Mrs. Jarker's death, for he had been gazing upon a picture that an artist would have been delighted to copy : Lucy Grey weeping over the sunny-haired child she had just fetched from Mrs. Sims' room. He was pained, for the scene had brought up the thoughts of its mother, and

her strange intimacy with Lucy, though the gentle, loving interest shown for the helpless, worse than orphan child, made his heart swell and beat faster as he thought of the mine of wealth, the tenderness the fair girl could bestow were she all he could have wished.

But the pain and sorrow predominated as he left the house and slowly descended, for he encountered *ma mère* upon the staircase, and he felt the colour mount to his temples as he met her sardonic smile and thought of her words; and then he hurried away, feeling at times that he must leave the place and seek another home, for his present life was wearying in the extreme. He would have done so before but for one powerful thought, one which he could feel would maintain its sway, so that he would be drawn back and his efforts rendered useless—efforts that he made to break the chain that fettered him. For her part, Lucy avoided him, meeting him but seldom, and then with flushed cheek and averted eye; while though in any other instance he would have declared instantly that flush to have been that of shame

or modesty, yet here, tortured by doubt, he could not satisfy himself, for at such times as he tried to be content came the memory of the scene in the Lane, and the words of the old Frenchwoman.

Lucy had fetched the child from across the court, but it was only admitted by Mrs. Septimus under sufferance, for she was in one of her weak fits that day, and if it had not been that Septimus encouraged the act, the little thing would have remained in Mrs. Sims' charge.

“Keep her, at all events, till I come back,” Septimus had said, and his evident desire to go out had somewhat shortened the curate's visit, for the desire was strong now upon Septimus to gain fresh information touching the legitimacy of his birth. The more now that obstacles sprung up, the more he felt disposed to assert his right; but he acknowledged to himself that it was but a passing fit, and that he would soon return to his old weakness and despondency. Still there was a warm feeling of friendship for Matt to prompt him to revisit the hospital at an early day, and, soon after the curate had left Bennett's-rents,

Septimus was on his way to the sick-bed of the old man.

He thought a great deal of old Matt's assertion that he had seen an entry somewhere ; but the more he thought, the more it seemed that this was merely a hallucination produced by his illness, for he could not but recall how he had confused it with matters of the past and present.

The old man slept when Septimus reached his bedside, and some time elapsed before he unclosed his dim eyes, and then they gazed blankly into his visitor's before he recognised him, when a light seemed to spread across his features, and he smiled faintly.

"Come again ? That's right. I wanted to ask you something, sir," he said.

"Indeed !" said Septimus eagerly, for he felt that it had to do with the matter in which he was interested.

"Why," said the old man, hesitating, "it was about the nurses, and your father, and—do you think that they had anything to do with the rats ?"

Shuddering, and with the cold sweat breaking out upon his face at the bare recollection, Septimus laid a hand upon the old man's breast, and gazed wonderingly at him.

"Hush," said Matt in a whisper, "don't speak loud, sir. I've been trying to put it all into shape. I think they had; and it's that woman who drinks my wine that knows all about it. They're keeping you out of your rights, sir, and they're all in the plot. Stoop down, please, a little closer; I want to whisper," and he drew his visitor nearer to him, so that his lips nearly touched his ear. "Medicine and attendance, sir, eh? That was it, wasn't it?"

Septimus felt his heart sink with disappointment, as he slowly nodded his head.

"I've found it out, sir," continued the old man; "found it out for you after travelling all over London. They think I've been here all the time; but, bless you, I've been out every night, and had it over with the posts in the street. They don't know it, bless you; but I've been tracking that entry, and, after the doctor has

dodged me all over London, I've followed him here. It's not Doctor Hardon, sir, and yet it is, you know; but I've not quite separated them, for they're somehow mixed up together, and I've not had time to put that quite right; but I'll do it yet. Interest for that shilling you once gave me, sir, just at the time I was that low that I'd nearly made up my mind to go off one of the bridges, and make a finish. But just see if either of the nurses is coming, sir, and tell me, for they're all in it, and they'll keep you and Miss Lucy out of your rights. Tell her I'm true as steel, sir, will you?"

"Yes, yes," said Septimus anxiously, for the old man seemed to be growing excited.

"But about that doctor, sir, and the entry," he continued, "it's here, sir; it's the house-surgeon, and I saw him make a memorandum here by my bedside: 'Medicine and attendance: Mrs. Hardon.' He put it down in his pocket-book, after sharpening his pencil upon a bright shining lancet; and he did not know that I was watching him. Take him by the throat, sir, as

soon as you see him, and make him give it to you."

"Try and compose yourself, Matt," said Septimus sadly, for he now felt that the whole history of the entry was but the offspring of a diseased mind. For a while he had suffered himself to hope that by some strange interposition of chance, with the old man for instrument, the whole matter was likely to be cleared up; but now the air-built castles were broken down—swept away by the sick man's incoherent speeches, and, after seeing him turn upon his side and close his eyes, the visitor rose to leave.

But old Matt heard the movement of his chair, and unclosed his eyes directly.

"You'll come again, sir, won't you?" he said, speaking quite calmly. "That always seems to make me clearer—shutting my eyes and having five minutes' doze. I'm weak, sir—very weak now; but I'm getting right, and I'll turn that over in my mind about the entry against you come again, when I can talk better, and try to set it right. But stop; let me see," he ex-

claimed,—“stop, I have it. I remember now, I did think all about it, and where it was I saw the entry; and for fear it should slip my mind again, I did as you told me, and as I always meant to do—put it down in my pocket-book under the pillow here;” and he drew forth the tattered memorandum-book, and held it out to his visitor.

Septimus turned over the leaves with trembling hands, coming upon technical references to trade-matters,—amounts in money of work done; calculations of quantity in pages of type. Then there were the baptismal and marriage entries they had made out, and beneath them some tremblingly-traced characters, evidently formed by the old man when in a reclining position; but, with the exception of the one word “Hardon,” they were completely illegible. He then turned to the old man; but his eyes were closed, and he seemed sleeping; so he replaced book and pencil beneath the pillow, and then, passing between the beds of other sufferers, each intent upon his own misery, he came suddenly upon the smiling

nurse, evidently waiting to see if there was a gratuity ready for her hand.

It was hard work parting with that shilling; but Septimus felt it to be a duty to slip it into the Jezebel's hand, and to whisper a few beseeching words that she would be kind and attentive to the old man.

"A quiet, patient old creature; you may rest quite happy about that, sir," said the nurse. "I'll treat him just as I would my own brother."

"He will get better?" said Septimus interrogatively.

The woman screwed her lips up very tightly as she said she hoped he might, but Septimus thought of the expiring lamp and its supply of oil; and it was little of his own affairs, and the possibility of there being an entry locked in the old man's clouded memory, that he thought of as he stammered, "Pray do all you can for him. I am sorry I can offer you no more."

"Bless you, sir, you needn't even have done

that. If it had been a guinea, it would have been all the same, and I shouldn't have thought a bit the better of you. We have a painful duty to perform here, sir, and it's an unthankful task, for there's no gratitude from the patients; but when a friend or relative makes one a little offering, why, setting aside the value, sir, it does seem to make things better, and to sweeten the toil. We never do expect any praise; while as to some of the tales the patients make up, you'd be surprised. Poor things! you see, their minds wander a bit, and they always seem to take a dislike to those who are like mothers to them. But there, sir, I always says to myself, I says, it's no use to take any notice of the poor things' whims, so long as we know we do our duty by them."

"I suppose," said Septimus, "their complaints weaken their intellects a good deal?"

"Wonderfully, I do assure you, sir. Now I shouldn't be a bit surprised if that poor gentleman, your friend, has been telling you all sorts of things?"

Septimus did not believe all that Matt had said, but he evaded the question.

“You’d be surprised, sir, if you only knew one-half the tales they make up, sir. There, I can’t help it, sir ; I laugh, I do, when I think of them ; for we must be able to eat and drink like bore-constructors, sir, to manage a quarter of what they says. They say we eat their chicking and jelly, and drink their wine, and gin, and fancy things the doctors order for them. Some even goes further than that ; but then the doctors know what people are in such a state, and don’t take any notice of them.”

“ ‘Mrs. Hardon ; medicine and attendance.’ I wonder whether it’s true, or only a sick man’s fancy ?” muttered Septimus aloud, as he went down the steps, and stood once more in the open air, feeling as though a weight had been raised from his spirits. “Poor creatures, poor creatures ! left to the tender mercies of those women, and often neglected and left to die.”

“No, no, no ! pray don’t say so,” sobbed a voice at his elbow. “It’s bad enough, I know ; but

not so bad as that, please!" And then a burst of sobs choked the speaker's utterance.

Septimus started, for the voice seemed familiar, and he saw beside him a tall, well-dressed female, with a thick wool-veil drawn down over her face, so that he could not distinguish her features.

"I knew you again, Mr.—Mr.—Mr.—you did tell me your name, but I've forgotten it; and I asked him, and he said—but dear, dear," she sobbed, "can you see that I have been crying? And have you been in that dreadful place?"

"Yes," replied Septimus; "but I really do not know to whom I am talking."

"O dear, O dear!" sobbed the woman, "it's me; you know me, that you called on in Chiswell-street; and I can't take up my fall, for my poor eyes are so red with crying, and people would see. Registry-office for servants, you know; and O dear, O dear!" and she sobbed more loudly than ever.

"Indeed, I beg your pardon," said Septimus

kindly; "but I could not know you through that thick veil."

"Then you could not see that I had been crying?" sobbed the poor woman.

"No, indeed," replied Septimus, "and—"

"Don't speak to me yet," ejaculated Miss Tollicks; "I'm almost heart-broken, and you set me off saying those cruel words. I'd give anything for a place where I could sit down and have a good cry, if it was only a doorstep, where people could not see me. I'm nearly blind now, and can't tell which way to go. It's ever so much worse than any trouble I ever had with my business."

"Take my arm," said Septimus gently, after an apologetic glance at his shabby clothes. "Lean upon me, and we'll walk slowly down this street. It is quieter here, and you will feel relieved soon."

"O, thank you, thank you," exclaimed Miss Tollicks, taking the proffered arm, and still sobbing loudly; "but you are sure that people cannot see I have been crying?"

“Certain,” said Septimus as they walked on.

“And so you think,” said Miss Tollicks, “that they are neglected and die, do you, Mr. Hardon? and I’m afraid the poor things are. I’ve just been to see my poor sister that the doctor recommended to go in, and she’s been telling me such dreadful tales about the nurses; and I can’t tell whether it’s the truth, or whether the poor thing is only light-headed. It was horrible to listen to her, that it was; and you’ve been to see some one too, Mr. Harding?”

“Yes,” replied Septimus, “the poor old gentleman who was with me when I called upon you.”

“Dear, dear, dear, what a sorrowful world this is!” sobbed Miss Tollicks; “nothing but trouble, always trouble; and how is he, poor man?”

“Not long for this world, I fear,” said Septimus softly.

“And did he say anything about the nurses too?” sobbed Miss Tollicks.

“Yes, yes,” said Septimus hastily; “but it

can't be true. No woman could be such a wretch."

"O, I don't know, Mr. Harding; but is my veil quite down? there—thank you. We're strange creatures, and we are either very good or else very bad—especially servants, Mr. Harding," sobbed Miss Tollicks. "I'm afraid that it's all true enough, and if they'd only let me stop and nurse my poor sister, I wouldn't care. The business might go and take its chance, for what's the good of money without life? But O, Mr. Harding, I did ask my landlord, and he said—and he said—but O! you must not ask me now." And here the poor woman burst out sobbing, quite hysterically, so that more than one person turned round to gaze upon her; but her troubles attracted little notice, for this was no uncommon scene in the long dreary street: the inhabitants were too much accustomed to the sight of weeping friends coming from the great building, where, but a few minutes before, they had been taking, perhaps, a last farewell of a dear one whom they would see no more—a dear

one whose face was perhaps already sealed by the angel of death; a sad parting, maybe, from one whose hopeless malady had rendered it necessary for the interior of the hospital to afford the attentions that took the place of those that would have been supplied at home. Poverty and sickness, twin sisters that so often go hand-in-hand, brought here their victims to ask for aid; and those who dwelt hard by paid little heed to pallid out-patients seeking their daily portion of advice, some on crutches, some leaning upon the arms of friends, some in cabs. They were used to painful scenes, and knew by sight patient, student, and doctor; and therefore hardly bestowed a thought upon the sad couple passing slowly down the street, at the end of which Septimus saw poor weeping Miss Tollicks into a cab, and left her unquestioned to pace slowly back towards Bennett's-rents.

He walked on and thought—thought of all his troubles, and the want of decision in his character; of how he ought boldly to have investigated his uncle's claim, setting aside his own feelings for

the sake of those dependent upon his arm for their support; and he sighed again and again as he took himself to task. And then a prayer rose to his lips as he recalled the scene which he had left—a prayer fervently breathed there in the midst of London's busy flowing stream, as fervent as ever emanated from devotee kneeling in some solemn fane—a prayer that, for the sake of those at home, he might be spared from the smiting of sickness; and then he shuddered as he remembered his father's words, and thought of his wife's increasing helplessness.

“Stark mad! Yes, I must have been,” he muttered; “and yet no, why was I to crush down my unselfish love?” And then he stopped short to examine himself as to whether his love had really been unselfish. But he passed on again unsatisfied, lost in abstracting thoughts, heedless of being jostled here, pushed there, a walking ensample in his short walk of what he was in his longer journey of life, a man whom everyone would expect to give place, while he full readily made way. Now he was shouted at by

a cabman as he crossed the road, then dragged back by a crossing-sweeper as he was about to step in front of an omnibus. But he looked elate, and thoughts of a brighter future rose before his mind as something seemed to whisper that all would yet be well; and as brighter thoughts came lighting in upon his heart's dark places, he saw old Matt well, and finding the entry that should restore him to ease and comfort; his wife and Lucy happy and smiling upon him; and then his head was lifted, his form grew more erect, his nerves and muscles became terse, and, swinging his arms, he strode forward till, turning down a side-street, he set off and ran—ran hard to the bottom, in the lightness of spirit that had come over him. He had no object in view, no reason for hastening, and the act seemed one of folly in a man of his years; but he felt the desire come upon him, and he ran, inflating his chest with the free air; and perhaps there have been times when, moved by similar impulses, men of the present day have felt, if they have not acted, the same as Septimus Hardon.

On again once more, this time to come in contact with a baker, whom he swung round basket and all, and when sworn at he apologised so cheerfully, and with such an aspect of genuine contrition, that the baker closed his voluble harangue with "Well, don't do it again, that's all." And perhaps, after all, the acts of Septimus Hardon were not of so very insane a character. True, they seemed strange for a man who had just come from a bed of sickness, and whose own affairs were in a most unsatisfactory state; but may there not have been something reactive after the oppression of much sorrow, the elasticity of life asserting itself? Be it what it may, certain it is that Septimus Hardon, aged fifty, acted as has been described, though it seemed strange conduct in a man who had suffered as he had.

Breathed again, he once more ran on, full of resolutions for the future, touching the vigorous prosecution of his claim, smiling, too, as he made the vows in doubt as to their fulfilment, for he knew his weakness; but he ran on, feeling more light-hearted than he had felt for years, till

suddenly he stopped and proceeded at a more moderate pace; for he trembled for his shoes, in whose durability he had not much faith, trusting their strength but little, for, placing the standard of boot-strength at twenty-six shillings, he remembered that he stood at three shillings and ninepence, plus his old ones, and he trembled.

Near home at last, where he arrived just in time to encounter *ma mère* the sinister, with her poodles, starting to give select entertainments through the evening in the far West; and, as he turned into the court, his light-heartedness passed away, the many hopeful thoughts vanished, and he sighed, for truly it was being under a cloud literally, as well as figuratively, to enter the precincts of Bennett's-rents.

CHAPTER XV.

THE COMMON LOT AGAIN.

ALL the renters appertaining to Bennett's were either out in the court, or at door and window, on the day that Mrs. Jarker was buried; while Lucy gladdened the heart of Jean Marais by taking charge of the little golden-haired child and carrying it up to his room to see the birds and dogs. Women stood in knots talking, with their arms rolled in their aprons, and a strong smell of rum, of the kind known as "pine-apple," and vended at the corner, pervaded these little assemblies. The sports of the children were interrupted, and slapping was greatly in vogue in consequence of mothers never having known their offspring to have been so tiresome before. Hopscotch was

banished from the court, tops and buttons confiscated, and there was not a boy or girl present who, in the face of so much tyranny, would not have emigrated to some more freedom-giving district, but for the fact that there was a "berryin;" and the shabby Shillibeer hearse, and its doleful horse and red-nosed driver, already stood at the end of the court, where the public-house doors were so carefully strapped back for the convenience of customers.

The time at which the funeral would take place was already well known, but for hours past the court had been in a state of excitement which prevented domestic concerns from receiving due attention. It was an observable fact that quite a large trade was done at the chandler's-shop in halfpenny bundles of wood, consequent upon fires being neglected, and doing what fires will do, going out. Babies screamed until they were hoarse, and then fell asleep to wake up and scream again. There were no bones broken, on account of the elasticity of the juvenile framework; but several children in the quadrupedal

stage of development were known to have fallen down flights of stairs during their maternal search ; while another diversion had been caused by a morsel forcing its foot through the grating over the drain, and refusing to be extricated. It was also observable that there were very few men about, and those visible confined themselves to the cellar-flap of one of the public-houses, only looking down the court at intervals.

At last there was an increased interest, for Mr. Pawley and one of his men had entered the house, women parting left and right to let them through. Then there was a buzz of excitement, for Mr. Jarker had been seen to enter the public and come out, to stand wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, apparently undecided as to which way he should go ; but at length, pale and scared-looking, walking up the court and following the undertaker.

And now the Jarkers were thoroughly canvassed, and many allusions made concerning Bill's treatment of his poor wife. Worn, dejected, hard - featured women, whose lives had

been as hard a bondage as that of the one passed away, but who made their brick without straw unrepining, told of her sufferings, and of how she had always been weak and sickly; while it was on all sides allowed that though, as a matter of course, a master might be a little hard sometimes, Jarker had been too hard, as she was so sickly. One thought it was the drains, another fancied the place wasn't quite healthy; but all agreed that there was nothing better to be had at the price; while the market was so handy. What was to become of the child too, formed a surmise in which Mrs. Sims took great interest; while, as soon as that lady's back was turned, it was universally agreed that she was "a good soul."

Another buzz of excitement. Mr. Jarker has been seen to come out with a crape scarf fastened upon his fur cap, while a short skimpy cloak hangs awkwardly from his ample shoulders. Mr. Jarker is very low-spirited, and finds it necessary to take something short once more in the way of a stimulant, and imbibes half-a-quartern of gin at the

public-house, his emblems of woe inducing a great amount of respect being paid to him by the occupants of the place, while one end of the scarf will keep getting in his way.

Mr. Jarker is a very great man this day, and comports himself with much dignity; he feels that he is being looked up to, and that he deserves it, but for all that he seems nervous and uncomfortable, and is now fetched back by the undertaker, who regularly takes him into custody, for he rightly fears that very little would make Mr. Jarker run off altogether and show himself no more for some days, when perhaps there might be a difficulty about the payment of the expenses. Not that Mr. Pawley has much fear upon that score, for there was always a certain pride respecting a decent "berryin" at Bennett's-rents; and supposing any one was very much pressed, there were always friendly hands ready to add their mites, with the understanding that one good turn deserved another. Mr. Pawley never suffered much in his transactions at the Rents, of which place he had the monopoly; and he always

made a point of insisting that all funerals should be not only what he termed economic, but strictly respectable.

“It’s a dooty we owe to the departed,” he would observe, while never once could he recall a dissentient, though assistance was often called in to defray the cost, and the well-known avuncular relative of the poor appealed to. Not that Mr. Pawley had very hard work to induce the poor of the district to do their “dooty” by the departed, for the desire was always there to pay the last sad rites decently and in order, even those who were obliged to stoop to get an order for a parish coffin often raising a tiny fund to induce Mr. Pawley to embellish the hard outlines of the common plain elm shell with a plate and a few rows of nails, to take off the workhouse look of the charity they grudged to accept.

Mr. Pawley managed to get Jarker safely back to the house, and then the excitement increased, for after the former gentleman had prisoned his client in a lodger’s room he came down wiping his eye, that seemed more moist than ever, and stood

mute-like at the door, surrounded by half the inhabitants of the court, whom he calmly informed that *they* were coming down directly. Mr. Pawley spoke slowly and impressively, for he was a man who had not much to say, but who made the most of it, as if his words were gold and to be beaten out to cover the largest space at the least possible cost. He considered his words of value, and as he doled them out people listened eagerly, looking upon the day's performance as something of which not the slightest item should be lost; while Mr. Pawley made much of his funerals, regarding each one as an advertisement to procure another, as he laboured hard to impress upon the dwellers of Bennett's-rents how friendly were his feelings towards them, and how little he thought of the money.

“Now they're a-coming!” he whispered, motioning the people away right and left—a very marshal of management—and then there was the shuffling of feet, the creaking and groaning of the stairs, and the chipping of the wall, as down flight after flight the coffin was carried, resting at the

landings, and more than once some neighbour's door was sent flying open. Mrs. Sims' was the first, as one of the bearers backed against it, and a lodger's on the first-floor was the next; but the occupiers were down in the court, and so escaped being disturbed.

At last, with the top covered with the powdery whitewash chipped from wall and ceiling, the coffin stood in the passage, then in the court for an instant, before being borne into the shabby Shillibeer hearse; while, amidst a suppressed hum of voices, more than one genuine tear was seen to fall, and more than one apron to be held up by those who saw the poor woman's remains borne away. Then back came Mr. Pawley on tiptoe with his handkerchief to his eye, and disappeared in the house, from which he soon reappeared with his prisoner, followed by two relatives; and, as Bill Jarker was marched down to the hearse with his ill-fitting cloak, and long crape scarf hanging from his fur-cap, he held his hands together in a strange, peculiar way—a way that, but for the trappings of woe, would have suggested that Mr. Jarker

was really in custody, and bore steel handcuffs upon his wrists.

Then there was a crowding towards the entrance of the court to see Mr. Jarker shut in, Mr. Pawley mount beside his red-nosed driver, and then the old broken-kneed horse went bowing its head and shambling along through the streets, with no more way made for it than if its doleful load had been so much merchandise.

Septimus Hardon had stood at his window watching the proceedings, as he slowly wiped again and again his pen upon a coat-tail; for the scene brought up a sad day in Carey-street, and he could not but recall the bright-eyed, yellow-haired child he had lost, and this set him thinking of the little one upstairs in Lucy's charge. But Septimus Hardon never thought very long upon any one particular subject; and, sighing deeply, he returned to his writing, while the people in the court slowly flocked back to form groups and talk until such time as it was necessary to get "master's tea." There was a considerable amount of thirst engendered though,

and the public-houses at the top and bottom of the court must have done quite a powerful stroke of trade that day in cream-gin and pine-apple rum; for the dull soft bang of the strapped-back doors was heard incessantly. For now, *à la militaire*, people's feelings seemed to undergo a reaction; children played and hooted again unabashed; the organ-man played the Olga waltz to a select circle of youthful dancers, while admiring mammas looked on and smiled; a party of "nigger" serenaders arrived at the lower public-house, and played and sang for a full hour, the coppers rattling in the reversed banjo freely, after the fortunes of the celebrated Old Bob Ridley had been musically rendered by a melodious gentleman of intense blackness, who had thrummed the wires of his instrument until his fingers were worn white. Then, too, after the departure of the sable minstrels, a lady volunteered a song; but she sang not, for an interdict was placed upon the proceedings by the landlord, who "couldn't stand none o' that, now." Then an altercation ensued, which ended in an adjournment, and the voluble de-

claration of some half-dozen departing matrons that they'd have no more to do with the goose-club.

But Mrs. Sims was not there. Ten minutes after the starting of the shabby funeral she went up to Septimus Hardon's rooms to fetch the little girl, but had to ascend to the attic, where she found her leaning against Lucy, who was seated upon the floor, laughing at the little thing's delight as first one and then the other of the poodles stood up and carried a stick in its mouth, while the dark eyes of Jean were fixed upon the beautiful group before him, ardently though with a speechless admiration.

With many thanks Mrs. Sims bore away the tiny girl, whose sleeves Lucy had tied up with bows of crape, and, as she accompanied the woman down the stairs it was only by an effort that she refrained from snatching the little one back and bearing it into her own room. But Mrs. Sims bore the prattling little thing away and seated it upon the carpet in her lodging, when, preparing to relieve herself after so much sorrow, she took up

the bellows : but as the fire was out she only made a dust, and, laying the pneumatic comfort aside, she took to "spazzums," which necessitated the sending of Marry Hann, a neighbour's child, for half-a-quartern of rum, which relieved the pain so much that she repeated the dose more than once, and, carrying the little girl with her, went down again for a social chat, being now insensible to pain. Half-an-hour had not elapsed, though, before a fresh twinge induced her to try another instalment of her "spefizzick," and now she not only became insensible to pain but to everything else. Mr. Jarker did not at once return after the funeral, but parted with his fellow-mourners without a word, after stopping at a public-house honoured by Mr. Pawley, and settling the expenses readily over some gin and beer, accompanied by pipes ; and, though more than one neighbour declared they saw him enter the door quite late, and come out early next morning, it was certain that he did not go up to his attic, a place which for some time he shunned after dark.

Mrs. Sims declared she saw nothing of him,

and doubtless her testimony was very trustworthy, for she had not the slightest recollection of what took place that night after the last administration of the “spefizzick,” nor of how she came into her own room till her angry husband explained. For when in the dusk of evening Lucy returned from the warehouse with a fresh pile of work, she found Mrs. Sims seated nodding upon the doorstep with the sleeping child in her flaccid arms, and in momentary danger of falling upon the broken flags. So taking the little thing, Lucy bore it to her own room; and from that time forth it often came to pass that she crossed the court when Mr. Jarker was from home, and attended to the wants of the little neglected child.

CHAPTER XVI.

A BATTLE : SCIENCE WINS.

“WHAT ! another operation ?” said old Matt with a groan.

“To be sure,” said the house-surgeon cheerily ;
“why not ?”

“But I’m so much better,” said Matt ; “and I’ve no end of work to get through.”

“I daresay, my man,” said the surgeon sadly,
“and so we all have ; and I fear that when the day comes upon which we are called away, we shall have as much to do as ever.”

“But I’m so much better now ; all but my head, sir, and I can’t quite think as I used to. Things bother me, and when I want to remember one particular matter, I get confused.”

“We shall put you all right this time, my

man, and then start you off to make room for someone else. We don't want a parcel of great lazy fellows here, fattening on our wine and jelly."

Old Matt smiled grimly as he said: "I say, sir, is it really necessary?"

"Why, of course, my man. We did you a great deal of good last time, did we not?"

"Ye-e-e-s, yes," said Matt; "you did, certainly, sir; but is it necessary that my poor old carcass should be touched again? It ain't for the sake of experiment now, is it, sir? I'm afraid, you know, you'll kill me; and, just for the sake of being fair, as you've had one turn at me, wouldn't it be better to try it on someone else—on some other subject?" And "O, dear!" thought the old man to himself, "what a difference between a Queen's subject and a doctor's subject!"

"Pooh, nonsense, old friend!" said the surgeon, laughing; "we'll make a man of you again; so cheer up, or you'll be working your nerves too much. Why, you've picked up wonderfully this last day or two."

“What’s the use of picking up, sir, if you get knocking me down again, eh, sir?”

The surgeon smiled and continued his round, and old Matt sat and grumbled by his bedside, for he was now up, and able to walk about the ward.

“Now let’s see,” muttered the old man. “I always did fancy, and it always seems so, that the more you try to think straightforward of a thing, the more it bothers you; so let’s try and get round to it back-way, if I can. Well, here goes. Now here’s Mr. Septimus Hardon—a man—well, not clever, but what of that? I hate your clever men; they’ve no room to be amiable, or time to be generous. He’s a good one, and that’s sufficient. Well, he’s kept, say, for sake of argument, out of his rights by his rogue of an uncle. Now he proves his baptism and his father’s marriage, and then he wants to prove the date of his birth to have been after the marriage. Easy enough that seems; but how to do it when t’other party has took possession, and declares all the other way. Doctor’s books

will do it, failing any other means ; and as we do fail other means, why we want the doctor's books. I tell you what it is ; I believe we have both bungled the matter from beginning to end, and ought to have gone to a good lawyer. But there, what's the good of talking ? We had no money, and people without money always bungle things. Now where's the doctor's books, or the doctor ? Doctor's dead—safe ; but then are his books dead—cut up—burnt ? That's the question. I say no, because I'm sure I saw that entry somewhere ; and here's the nuisance. When I was situated so that it would have been almost a blessing to be shut up here in hospital, I wasn't ill ; now I want all my energies, I'm chained by the leg. I'd give up bothering about the thing, but I'm sure I read it somewhere, and I'm sure, too, I recollected once where it was ; and it was while I was so bad," he said, pulling out his tattered memorandum-book, and referring to the hieroglyphics it contained. "No," he said, after a long inspection ; "I have read a good deal, and taken some copy in my time, but I never

thought I should live to write stuff I couldn't read myself. There, it's of no use ; it'll come some day." And he closed his eyes, and leaned his head upon his hand ; for his brain seemed weary and restless with his long and painful illness.

A morning or two after, the old man was again seated at his bedside, trying to amuse himself with a book ; but with little success, for his eyes were weak.

" I shall let well alone," growled the old man ; " and if they want to operate, they may cut and carve someone else. I shall do for the few years I have to live ; but they might find a poor fellow a scrap of snuff, hang 'em !"

" Here, you No. 19, into bed with you directly !"

" Why, I'm only just up," grumbled Matt, who was the said number.

" Never mind, old fellow," said the speaker ; " be smart, for they will be after you directly."

Old Matt shivered and trembled, and his

lips moved as he slowly returned to his bed, and there lay waiting. He had almost determined to be content, and bear his burden to the grave; for, said he, "I can't live much longer." But then he thought of the wondrous skill and care of those in whose hands he would be, and of the rest that would afterwards be his were his life spared.

"I won't turn coward now," he muttered, letting his eyes rest upon some flowers in a window near his bed, and gazing at them in a strange earnest way,—“No, I won't turn coward, not even if they kill me. But that's hard to think of, that is. Mine has been a rough life, and I've put up with a deal; but I never tired of it—not to say thoroughly tired of it, though I've been very near more than once; and I should like to keep grinding on for a long time yet. Life's sweet, somehow, when you've got friends, and I seem to have found 'em at last. I should have liked to have helped him out with that entry, though. Where did I see it?”

The old man paused thoughtfully, and kept

passing his hand across his dew-wet forehead ; but the memory was still defective, and he sighed wearily : “ Why didn’t I begin sooner, or make him begin ? Ah, that’s it—that’s it ! why don’t we begin hundreds of things sooner, and not leave them till it’s too late ! ”

The old man paused again, and his lean, bony fingers clutched and clawed restlessly to get at the flowers. But his old train of thought now seemed to have returned, for he continued : “ Don’t often see anything about hospital operations, but I have had copy about them—‘ Death from the Administration of Chloroform.’ What an ugly word that first is, and what a shiver it seems to give one when we think of it in connection with ourselves, though it seems so little when it has to do with anyone else ! Wonder whether any of the old ’stab. or piece hands would get hold of it to set, and feel sorry for the battered old stamp they used to laugh at, and whether it would get into the papers if I was to— ”

The old man stopped once more, and wiped the dew from his wet forehead.

“Well, well,” he said half-aloud, “what is to be will be. God help me well through it all, for I’m a miserable coward ; and if it’s to be the end of old Matt, why, I don’t think I’ve been so very bad, and—there, hang it!” he whined, “they might have left me a pinch of snuff. Here, I say, though,” he cried, rousing up, “this won’t do. I’m on the wrong folio, and shall have to re-set.”

“I wonder whether it’s hard to die?” he muttered, after another pause. “Don’t seem as if it was, for they look almost as if they were asleep, and wanting to be woke up again. One must go sometime or another ; but it would have been happier like to have had hold of someone’s hand, and seen two or three faces round one’s bed, faces of people sorry I was going—going. There, there,” he gasped, “I can’t stand it. They sha’n’t touch me. It’s like running headlong into one’s grave. They sha’n’t touch me, for I must live and find out about the doctor, for that poor helpless fellow in the Rents ; or he’ll never do it himself. They sha’n’t touch me, for I am nearly clear now, and

I can grub on as I am ; while, if my chronics kill me in time, why they do, and there's an end of it. They sha'n't—"

"Now, No. 19," said a voice, and to his dismay poor old Matt saw a couple of porters enter the ward with a stretcher.

The old man moaned and closed his eyes, muttering the whole while as he resigned himself, meekly as a child and without a word of opposition, to the men, who tenderly lifted him upon their portable couch, and then bore him along the whitewashed passages, whose walls seemed so familiar to him, and struck him as being so particularly white and clean—white as were ceiling and floor. He only saw one cobweb, and that was out of reach in a far corner ; and in his nervous state this greatly attracted his attention, so that he could fancy the large spider grinned at him as if he were a larger kind of fly in the trammels of a net. He felt that he should have liked for the men to set down the stretcher and remove that cobweb, but he stifled the desire to speak. Then he noticed how strangely the hair of his foremost

bearer grew, and this, too, troubled him : there were no short hairs on the poll, and for some distance up the back of his neck was a barren land. Then he fell to studying the man's coat-buttons, the depth of his collar, and how easily he tramped along with the handles of the portable couch, whose motion was so easy with the light, regular, springy pace of the man ; while the dread of what was impending seemed quite to have passed away, and he began, now the peril was so near, to think of himself as though he were someone else in whom he took an interest ; and then came a very important question :

How would they bring him back ?

Would he be lighter with the loss of blood, and would he be gradually stiffening, and growing colder and colder, till the icy temperature of death pervaded him through and through ? And then, too, what would they do with him ? He had no relations—no one to come and claim his body. And even this thought seemed to trouble him but little, for he smiled grimly, muttering to himself :

“Cause of science, sir, cause of science ; and besides, it won’t matter then.”

On still, with a light swinging motion and an easy tread, the porters bore their load, and in the minute or two the removal occupied old Matt thought of the last time he had made that journey, and his sensations then : how that he had looked upon it all as a dream, and felt that he should soon wake up to find himself in bed. But the old man’s musings ceased as he was borne into the theatre, save for an instant when the thought flashed across his mind, Suppose he died without seeing the entry ? and this troubled him for a few moments ; but directly after he was gazing up with anxious eye at the tier upon tier of benches, some crowded, some nearly empty, and looking from face to face ; but there seemed not one that sympathised with him, as, after a glance when he was first borne in, a quiet light, chatty conversation was carried on in an undertone. Then there was almost perfect silence, and the old man felt himself to be the centre upon which every eye was fixed. His heart told him

now that in the low-murmured buzz of conversation that rose, students who had again and again stood at his bedside were discussing his case, and that if the operation were unsuccessful or unskillfully performed, they would merely say that the patient did not rally, and then go home or to their studies, regardless of the little gap left in the ranks of life ; while Septimus Hardon would probably never succeed in his endeavours to recover his lost position.

Then he half-smiled as he thought of the importance with which he rated himself, and looked eagerly round. Close by he could see the earnest, study-lined faces of several older men, many of them gray-haired and thoughtful-eyed—men of eminence in their profession, but strongly imbued with the belief of the man of wisdom, that we are ever but learners. Then he looked straight above, even at the skylight, where he could see that the sun illumined the thick ground-glass ; and now once more, in a quiet musing vein, he set to wondering how it would be after the operation.

Plenty of faces round, but mostly cool, calm,

and matter-of-fact. Here were the hospital dressers and assistants, standing by the table—a curious-looking table in the centre of an open space ; and a hasty glance showed him sponges, and water, and cloths, and lint, and mahogany cases, that at another time, if some other sufferer were to have been operated upon, would have caused him to shudder. But all that was past now, and he merely looked earnestly round till his gaze rested upon a stout gray-haired, keen-eyed man, whose black clothes and white neck-tie were spotless, and who now advanced to the table with a quiet business-like aspect, as he bowed somewhat stiffly to the assembled surgeons and students, and then spoke a few cheering words to the patient as he felt his pulse.

“I hope he won’t turn nervous over it,” thought Matt. “Be serious to a man in his position, with so many looking on.—Can’t I have the chloroform?” he then whispered to a dresser by his side.

“Yes, of course : here he is with it,” said the man ; and for the second time in his life Matt

gazed curiously at a polished mahogany box which was being brought forward.

"I say," whispered Matt earnestly to the man at his side, "if anyone comes afterwards—afterwards, you know, and asks for me, you'll say, 'Medicine and attendance,'—there, don't laugh—it's particular—you'll say, 'Medicine and attendance;' and that old Matt tried to think it out to the last. You'll do that for me?" he whispered earnestly.

The man repeated the words over, and smiled as he made the required promise.

"Tell him not to give me too much," said Matt, now with the first display of anxiety, as he glanced at the inhaling apparatus.

The time since old Matt had been brought into the theatre might be reckoned by moments; and now, in the midst of a profound stillness, the gray-haired man calmly raised his eyebrows, turned up his sleeves, and then walked a step or two from the patient, now inhaling the wondrous vapour of that simple-looking limpid fluid, whose first effect was to cause him to push away the appa-

ratus and struggle feebly with those who administered it. But there was a strong hand upon his pulse and a pair of stern eyes watching him, and, as the mouthpiece was kept firmly against his face, old Matt gave one or two more inspirations and became insensible. Then every eye was fixed upon the calm, business-like man, whose nerves seemed of kindred material to the blades he drew from their delicate purple-velvet resting-places and quietly inspected for an instant, his eyes flashing brightly as their gray-hued blades—knives whose keen edges were formed of the finest-tempered metal that human skill and ingenuity could produce.

A breathless silence ensued, and the gay thoughtless aspect was gone from the young faces crowding the benches. Here and there an assumed cynical smile could be seen, but the effects of a strange clutching at the heart, a curious vibration of the nerves, was visible in the pallor of cheeks and fevered aspect of the onlookers of the upper seats. Two young men right at the back surreptitiously drank from small flasks, and when

wiping their lips paused, too, to pass their handkerchiefs over their damp foreheads, before thrusting them in their moist palms as the great surgeon—one who had climbed by slow degrees to his present eminence in the profession, and upon whose knowledge and skill now depended the life of a fellow-creature—gave his quick, sharp orders, and changed the position of one or two assistants at the operating-table, pointing, like a general preparing for battle, with the keen blade he held in his hand. Short, quick orders as he grasped the flashing steel and made ready for the fight—for the *combat à l'outrance*, with the grim, slow-crawling, dragon disease—a fight where skill and genius took the place of physical force and daring.

A painful silence, and then, while every eye was fixed upon his movements, the great surgeon gave a hasty glance round to see that all was in readiness for the time when moments were more than grains of gold, and would add their weight in one scale of the balance—life or death; but all seemed there, ready hands and the many appliances for checking the rapid flow of life's stream,

and then, with almost an air of nonchalance, he stretched out his arms to secure freedom of action.

Not a whisper, not a movement, the spectators of the scene with craning necks, immovable as groups of statuary, as they gazed from their tiers of benches in this modern amphitheatre down upon the gladiatorial combat taking place, even as of old the Roman citizens may have watched some fight for life or death.

A keen bright flash of the blade in the softened light, and the surgeon thoughtfully describing an imaginary curve in the air with the point just above the insensible patient ; then, with a satisfied nod, he leaned forward. There was once more a bright flash of the knife, followed by a bold, firmly-directed cut, deep and long, but clear of vital parts in the wondrous organisation. Then came the spouting gush from many a vessel as the old man's life-blood rushed from its maze ; busy fingers at work, here upon arteries to stay their waste, there applying sponge ; one blade changed for another, more manipulation, and orders per-

formed after being given in a calm impressive whisper; a few more busy moments, and the throbbing flow of life arrested; rapidly-moving fingers with sponges, silk, strapping, towels; and the great surgeon softly wiping his hands, cool, calm, and unruffled.

“Very little loss, Mr. Grant,” to the next general in command.

“Extremely little,” with a bow and a smile; “most successful operation.”

“Well, well, I think so,” said the great man, unbending somewhat as he arranged his cuffs and brushed off an imaginary speck of dust. He then felt the patient’s pulse for a few moments, nodded with a satisfied air, said a few words to the chief of his staff, bowed once more, and by the time the hospital-dressers had finished their task and the patient was lifted back upon his portable couch, the operator was in the brougham waiting in the street.

Then came once more the murmuring buzz of voices, the reaction and the pallor tried to be laughed down, the porters, and then in a few

minutes old Matt was once more in his bed and comfortably arranged before he recovered consciousness.

The house-surgeon and an assistant were beside his bed as he opened his eyes and stared vacantly about, trying to recall what had taken place.

“How sick and faint—what a nasty dream!” he muttered; “but I don’t know, sir,—been as well if it had been true.”

“What would?” said the surgeon, smiling.

“Why, I dreamed, sir, that—why, so it was—so it was, then,” muttered the old man fervently; “thank God, thank God!”

A calm heavy sleep soon fell upon Matt, but he was not free from trouble then. There was the entry continually worrying him; now he knew he had seen it, now he felt that it was only a dream, or a dream within a dream. At last, though, a change came over the scene, and all was prosperity; he had entered into partnership with Septimus Hardon, and purchased the copyright of the *Times*, whose columns they regularly

filled every day with a complete exposure of Doctor Hardon.

But the dream was not founded upon fact, for Septimus Hardon, with hope in his breast, had been to the entrance of the hospital, thinking that now Matt was so much better he would perhaps be ready with some information. But the visitor had been told of the operation, and the old man's present critical state, while being advised not to see him at that visit ; and receiving a promise that a message should be sent in the event of a change for the worse, Septimus Hardon slowly, and sadly disheartened, returned to his law-copying.

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